

GAO

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U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

State Department Efforts  
Lack Certain  
Communication Elements  
and Face Persistent  
Challenges

Statement of Jess T. Ford, Director  
International Affairs and Trade





Highlights of [GAO-06-707T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Science, the Departments of State, Justice, and Commerce, and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Public opinion polls have shown continued negative sentiments toward the United States in the Muslim world. Public diplomacy activities—led by the State Department (State)—are designed to counter such sentiments by explaining U.S. foreign policy actions, countering misinformation, and advancing mutual understanding between nations. Since 2003, we have issued three reports on U.S. public diplomacy efforts that examined (1) changes in public diplomacy resources since September 11, 2001; (2) strategic planning and coordination of public diplomacy efforts; and (3) the challenges facing these efforts.

## What GAO Recommends

We have made several recommendations in the last 3 years to the Secretary of State to address strategic planning issues, private sector engagement, and staffing challenges related to public diplomacy. For example, today's report recommends that the Secretary develop written guidance detailing how the department intends to implement its public diplomacy goals as they apply to the Muslim world. State has consistently concurred with our findings and recommendations for improving public diplomacy, and the department, in several cases, is taking appropriate actions. However, the department has not established a timetable for many of these actions.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-707T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-707T).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4128 or [fordj@gao.gov](mailto:fordj@gao.gov).

## U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

# State Department Efforts Lack Certain Communication Elements and Face Persistent Challenges

## What GAO Found

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, State has expanded its public diplomacy efforts globally, focusing particularly on countries in the Muslim world considered to be of strategic importance in the war on terrorism. Since 2001, State has increased its public diplomacy resources, particularly in regions with significant Muslim populations. That funding trend has continued more recently, with increases of 25 percent for the Near East and 39 percent for South Asia from 2004 to 2006, though public diplomacy staffing levels have remained largely the same during that period. The Secretary of State recently announced plans to reposition some staff to better reflect the department's strategic priorities, including plans to shift 28 public diplomacy officers from posts in Europe and Washington, D.C., to China, India, and Latin America, as well as to the Muslim world.

In 2003 and again in 2005, we reported that the government lacked an interagency communication strategy to guide governmentwide public diplomacy activities, and it continues to lack this strategy. We also noted that State did not have a strategy to integrate its diverse public diplomacy activities and that efforts to effectively engage the private sector had met with mixed success. In 2005, State developed a strategic framework to focus its public diplomacy efforts and related tactics to achieve its goals, including marginalizing extremists and promoting understanding of shared values. However, the department has not issued guidance to its posts abroad on how to implement these strategies and tactics. In addition, posts' public diplomacy efforts generally lack important strategic communication elements found in the private sector, which GAO and others have suggested adopting as a means to better communicate with target audiences. These elements include having core messages, segmented target audiences, in-depth research and analysis to monitor and evaluate results, and an integrated communication plan to bring all these elements together. State officials indicate that the department has begun to develop communication plans for 15 pilot posts, but it remains to be seen whether these communication plans will contain all of these strategic elements.

Posts throughout the world, and particularly in the Muslim world, face several challenges in implementing their public diplomacy programs, including concerns related to staff numbers and language capabilities and the need to balance security with public outreach. For example, we found that 24 percent of language-designated public diplomacy positions worldwide were filled by officers without the requisite language skills. Furthermore, security concerns have limited embassy outreach efforts and public access. State has begun to address many of these challenges, but it is too early to evaluate the effectiveness of many of these efforts.

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss GAO's work on U.S. public diplomacy efforts, particularly in the Muslim world.<sup>1</sup> Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, foreign public opinion polls have shown that negative attitudes toward the United States have generally grown worse in many countries around the world. One particular concern has been a marked worsening of such attitudes in the Muslim world—an audience of key strategic interest in the United States' war on terrorism. U.S. public diplomacy activities—led by the State Department (State)—are designed to counter such sentiments by explaining U.S. foreign policy actions, countering misinformation, and advancing mutual understanding among nations. Today, we are issuing a report on the State's public diplomacy efforts in the Muslim world.<sup>2</sup> This follows our April 2005 report examining interagency coordination of public diplomacy activities<sup>3</sup> and our September 2003 report on State's overall public diplomacy efforts.<sup>4</sup> These efforts include daily news operations, information programs, and various types of exchange programs.

Mr. Chairman, you asked us to discuss our findings from these reports and, where possible, to highlight ways of strengthening public diplomacy going forward. Today, I will talk about (1) changes in U.S. public diplomacy resources since September 11, 2001; (2) strategic planning and coordination of public diplomacy efforts; and (3) the challenges facing these efforts. My comments will focus on State's activities, as State was the subject of our work. While our most recent report focuses on activities in the Muslim world, many of our findings apply to public diplomacy efforts worldwide.

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<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of this testimony, the "Muslim world" refers to the 58 countries and territories identified as "countries with significant Muslim populations" by the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. This list includes Muslim-majority countries and members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

<sup>2</sup>GAO, *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).

<sup>3</sup>GAO, *U.S. Public Diplomacy: Interagency Coordination Efforts Hampered by the Lack of a National Communication Strategy*, [GAO-05-323](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 4, 2005).

<sup>4</sup>GAO, *U.S. Public Diplomacy: State Department Expands Efforts but Faces Significant Challenges*, [GAO-03-951](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 4, 2003).

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As part of our reviews of public diplomacy, we met with officials from the Departments of State and Defense (DOD), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). We traveled to Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom and met with a broad cross-section of U.S. embassy officials, British Council and embassy staff, and local focus groups. We also convened roundtables of experts on public relations, international opinion research, and the Muslim world. The reports used for this testimony were conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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## Summary

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, State has expanded its public diplomacy efforts globally, focusing particularly on countries in the Muslim world considered to be of strategic importance in the war on terrorism. Since 2001, State has increased its public diplomacy resources, particularly in regions with significant Muslim populations. From 2004 to 2006, funding in two regions with significant Muslim populations—the Near East and South Asia—increased 25 and 39 percent, respectively. However, public diplomacy staffing levels have remained largely the same during that period.

Since 2003, we have reported that the government lacked an interagency public diplomacy strategy to guide the activities of disparate agencies, and it continues to lack this strategy. We also noted that State did not have a strategy to integrate its diverse public diplomacy activities and that efforts to effectively engage the private sector had met with mixed success. State has begun to address these shortcomings. In 2005, State developed a strategic framework to focus its public diplomacy efforts and related tactics to achieve its goals, including marginalizing extremists and promoting understanding of shared values. However, the department has not issued guidance to its posts abroad on how to implement these strategies and tactics. In addition, our report released today reveals that posts' public diplomacy efforts generally lack important strategic communication elements found in the private sector, which we and others have suggested adopting as a means to better communicate with target audiences. These elements include having core messages, segmented target audiences, in-depth research and analysis to monitor and evaluate results, and an integrated communication plan to bring all these elements together. State officials indicated that the department has begun an effort to develop communication plans for 15 pilot posts, but it remains to be seen whether these communication plans will contain all of these strategic elements.

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State faces multiple challenges in implementing its public diplomacy programs, especially at the field level. These challenges include concerns related to staff numbers, time available for public diplomacy activities, staff language capabilities, and the need to balance security with public outreach. According to State data, roughly 15 percent of its public diplomacy positions overseas were vacant in 2005. Several embassy officials indicated that insufficient numbers of staff and lack of staff time for public diplomacy activities hinder outreach efforts. We also identified this problem in our 2003 report, where a survey of Public Affairs officers in the field showed that more than 50 percent said that the number of public diplomacy officers was inadequate and more than 40 percent said the amount of time available for public diplomacy activities was insufficient. The Secretary of State recently announced plans to reposition some staff, including plans to shift 28 public diplomacy officers from posts in Europe and Washington, D.C., to China, India, and Latin America, as well as to the Muslim world. Additionally, our report notes that 30 percent of officers in language-designated public diplomacy positions in the Muslim world have not attained the level of language proficiency required for their positions, hampering their ability to engage with foreign publics. In addition to these staffing challenges, security concerns limit public diplomacy activities, especially in the Muslim world. Security, along with budgetary concerns, has forced embassies to close publicly accessible facilities and curtail certain public outreach efforts, sending the unintended message that the United States is unapproachable. The department has attempted to compensate for the lack of public presence through a variety of means, including the use of small-scale external facilities, and expanded embassy speaker programs.

We have made several recommendations since 2003 to the Secretary of State to address strategic planning issues, private sector engagement, and staffing challenges related to public diplomacy. For example, in 2003, we recommended that the Secretary develop a strategy that integrates private sector techniques into its public diplomacy efforts and that the Secretary strengthen efforts to train Foreign Service officers in foreign languages and public diplomacy. Today's report recommends that the Secretary develop written guidance detailing how the department intends to implement its public diplomacy goals as they apply to the Muslim world and strengthen existing systems of sharing best practices to more systematically transfer knowledge among embassies around the world. The primary purpose of these proposed actions is to help officers in the field strategically plan and implement public diplomacy programs in line with the Under Secretary's articulated goals. State has consistently concurred with our findings and recommendations for improving public

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diplomacy and indicated that the department, in several cases, is taking appropriate actions, such as developing a broad public diplomacy strategy and strengthening strategic planning at the post level. However, the department has not established a timetable for many of these actions, including the issuance of an interagency public diplomacy strategy and the creation of the Office of Private Sector Outreach.

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## Background

The overall goal of U.S. public diplomacy is to understand, inform, engage, and influence the attitudes and behavior of foreign audiences in ways that support U.S. strategic interests. The State Department leads these efforts, which are guided by the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs and include academic and professional exchanges, English language teaching, information programs, and news management. The department's regional and functional bureaus also contain public diplomacy offices, which report to the relevant assistant secretary. The Under Secretary has direct authority over the three public diplomacy bureaus but does not have line authority over public diplomacy operations in other regional or functional bureaus.<sup>5</sup> In overseas missions, Foreign Service public diplomacy officers (including Public Affairs, Cultural Affairs, Information, Information Resources, and Regional English Language officers) operate under the authority of the chief of mission and report to their regional bureau managers in Washington, D.C.

In fiscal year 2005, State dedicated \$597 million to public diplomacy and public affairs. According to the department's performance plan, its investment in public diplomacy continues to increase, particularly for efforts targeting audiences in the Middle East. Exchange programs received \$356 million, the majority of fiscal year 2005 funding and a 12.4 percent increase over fiscal year 2004. State's information programs received roughly \$68 million in fiscal year 2005 to fund programs such as the U.S. speakers program, mission Web sites, and American Corners, which are centers that provide information about the United States, hosted in local institutions and staffed by local employees. The remaining public diplomacy funds went to State's regional bureaus to pay the salaries of locally engaged staff overseas, among other purposes.

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<sup>5</sup>State has begun to appoint "dual-hatted" Deputy Assistant Secretaries for Public Diplomacy in each of the six regional bureaus. These individuals report directly to both their Regional Assistant Secretary and to the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.

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## Public Diplomacy Resources Have Shifted to the Muslim World, but Staffing Numbers Have Levelled Off

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, State has expanded its public diplomacy efforts globally, focusing particularly on countries in the Muslim world considered to be of strategic importance in the war on terrorism. Between 2004 and 2006, total spending on overseas public diplomacy will increase 21 percent, from \$519 million to an estimated \$629 million. Much of this increase has gone to regions with significant Muslim populations, including South Asia (39 percent), East Asia and the Pacific (28 percent), and the Near East (25 percent). These increases continue the trend we reported in 2003, when we found that the largest relative increases in overseas public diplomacy resources went to regions with large Muslim populations. However, the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs continues to receive the largest overall share of overseas public diplomacy resources—roughly 36 percent of the total for all six regional bureaus.

In 2003, we noted that authorized officer positions overseas had significantly expanded, with the most notable increases occurring in State's Near East (27-percent increase) and South Asia (15-percent increase) bureaus. However, current data show that staff numbers have stayed largely the same over the past 3 years, with increases of 3 percent or less. In January 2006, Secretary Rice announced plans to reposition officers as part of her transformational diplomacy initiative. State officials said that the department will initially reposition approximately 75 Foreign Service officers this year from posts in Europe and Washington, D.C., to India, China, and Latin America, as well as to the Muslim world. According to these officials, 28 of the positions to be relocated are public diplomacy positions.

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## Strategy, Planning, and Coordination Efforts Are Inadequate

Since 2003, we have reported on the lack of strategic elements to guide U.S. public diplomacy efforts. Despite several attempts, the United States still lacks an interagency public diplomacy strategy. While State has recently developed a strategic framework for its public diplomacy efforts, it has not issued guidance on how this framework is to be implemented in the field. In addition, posts generally lack a strategic approach to public diplomacy.

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## Government Lacks an Interagency Public Diplomacy Strategy

In 2003, we reported that the United States lacked a governmentwide, interagency public diplomacy strategy, defining the messages and means for communication efforts abroad. We reported that the administration had made a number of aborted attempts to develop a strategy, but to date no public diplomacy strategy has been developed. The lack of such a

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strategy complicates the task of conveying consistent messages, which increases the risk of making damaging communication mistakes. State officials said that the lack of such a strategy diminishes the efficiency and effectiveness of governmentwide public diplomacy efforts, while several reports concluded that a strategy is needed to synchronize agencies' target audience assessments, messages, and capabilities.

On April 8, 2006, the President established a new Policy Coordination Committee on Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications. This committee, to be led by the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs,<sup>6</sup> is intended to coordinate interagency activities to ensure that:

- all agencies work together to disseminate the President's themes and messages;
- all public diplomacy and strategic communications resources, programs, and activities are effectively coordinated to support those messages; and
- every agency gives public diplomacy and strategic communications the same level of priority that the President does.

According to department officials, one of the committee's tasks will be to issue a formal interagency public diplomacy strategy. It is not clear when this strategy will be developed.

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## State Has Established Public Diplomacy Strategic Framework but Lacks Implementing Guidance

In 2005, the Under Secretary established a strategic framework for U.S. public diplomacy efforts, which includes three priority goals: (1) support the President's Freedom Agenda with a positive image of hope; (2) isolate and marginalize extremists; and (3) promote understanding regarding shared values and common interests between Americans and peoples of different countries, cultures, and faiths. The Under Secretary noted that she intends to achieve these goals using five tactics—engagement, exchanges, education, empowerment, and evaluation—and by using various public diplomacy programs and other means. This framework partially responds to our 2003 recommendation that the department

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<sup>6</sup>The Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications and Global Outreach will serve as the committee's executive secretary. This position, whose responsibilities include U.S. public diplomacy efforts, was created in March 2005 when the President reorganized the National Security Council.

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develop and disseminate a strategy to integrate all State's public diplomacy efforts and direct them toward achieving common objectives. However, the department has not yet developed written guidance that provides details on how the Under Secretary's new strategic framework should be implemented in the field.

In 2005, we noted that State's efforts to engage the private sector in pursuit of common public diplomacy objectives had met with mixed success and recommended that the Secretary develop a strategy to guide these efforts. State is currently establishing an office of private sector outreach and is partnering with individuals and the private sector on various projects. The Under Secretary plans to institutionalize this function within the department surrounding key public diplomacy objectives, but it is unclear when this office will be established and whether it will develop a comprehensive strategy to engage the private sector.

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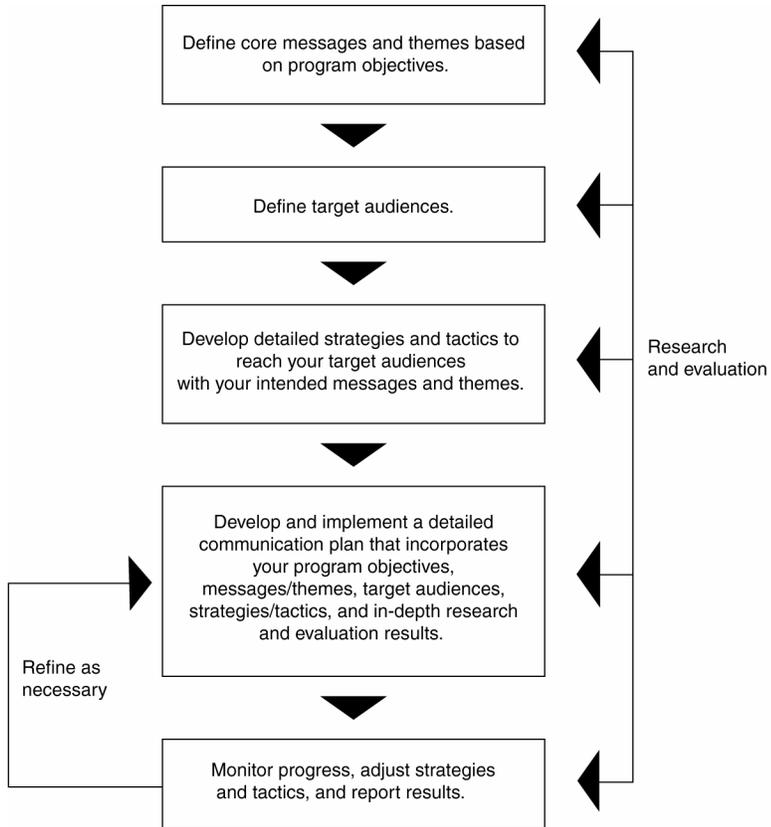
## Posts Lack a Strategic Approach to Public Diplomacy

GAO and others have suggested that State adopt a strategic approach to public diplomacy by modeling and adapting private sector communication practices to suit its purposes (see fig. 1). However, based on our review of mission performance plans<sup>7</sup> and on fieldwork in Nigeria, Pakistan, and Egypt, we found that the posts' public diplomacy programming generally lacked these important elements of strategic communications planning. In particular, posts lacked a clear theme or message and did not identify specific target audiences. According to a senior embassy official in Pakistan, the United States has too many competing messages, and the post needs to do a better job of defining and clarifying its message. Posts also failed to develop detailed strategies and tactics to direct available public diplomacy programs and tools toward clear, measurable objectives in the most efficient manner possible. Finally, posts lack detailed, country-level communication plans to coordinate their various activities.

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<sup>7</sup>Mission performance plans serve as top-level statements of agency program goals and objectives, resource requirements, strategies and tactics, and performance indicators.

**Figure 1: Key Elements of a Typical Public Relations Strategy**



Source: GAO.

Recently, State has begun to help posts improve their strategic communications planning. For example, the department has issued guidance on preparing fiscal year 2008 mission performance plans that calls for more strategic thinking and planning than was required in the past, including identification of specific target audiences, key themes and messages, detailed strategies and tactics, and measurable performance outcomes that can clearly demonstrate the ultimate impact of U.S. public diplomacy efforts. If fully implemented, this guidance should begin to address the shortcomings we found in mission performance plans; however, it will not be implemented for another 2 years, raising significant concerns about what the department intends to do now to address strategic planning shortfalls. Moreover, it is unclear whether this guidance

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will include all the strategic elements from private sector communication practices.

In addition to this guidance, the department is currently developing a sample country-level communication plan and has asked 15 pilot posts to develop specific plans for their host countries. These plans are intended to better focus U.S. efforts to counter ideological support for terrorism, according to State. Part of this process will include the development of a key influencers analysis to help identify target audiences in each country. State officials said that they expect to have plans for these countries by fall or winter 2006.

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## Staffing Challenges and Security Concerns Limit U.S. Public Diplomacy Activities

Public diplomacy efforts in the field face several other challenges, many of which are heightened in the Muslim world. Officials at posts we visited said they lacked sufficient staff and time to conduct public diplomacy tasks, and we found that many public diplomacy positions are filled by officers without the requisite language skills. Furthermore, public diplomacy officers struggle to balance security with public access and outreach to local populations.

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## Insufficient Staff and Lack of Staff Time Hinders Public Diplomacy Activities

While several recent reports on public diplomacy have recommended an increase in spending on U.S. public diplomacy programs, several embassy officials stated that, with current staffing levels, they do not have the capacity to effectively utilize increased funds. According to State data, the department had established 834 public diplomacy positions overseas in 2005, but 124, or roughly 15 percent, were vacant. Compounding this challenge is the loss of public diplomacy officers to temporary duty in Iraq, which, according to one State official, has drawn down field officers even further. Staffing shortages may also limit the amount of training public diplomacy officers receive. According to the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, “the need to fill a post quickly often prevents public diplomacy officers from receiving their full training.”<sup>8</sup>

In addition, public diplomacy officers at post are burdened with administrative tasks and thus have less time to conduct public diplomacy outreach activities than previously. One senior State official said that

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<sup>8</sup>U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, *2005 Report* (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 7, 2005).

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administrative duties, such as budget, personnel, and internal reporting, compete with officers' public diplomacy responsibilities. Another official in Egypt told us that there was rarely enough time to strategize, plan, or evaluate her programs. These statements echo comments we heard during overseas fieldwork and in a survey for our 2003 report. Surveyed officers told us that, while they manage to attend functions within their host country capitals, it was particularly difficult to find time to travel outside the capitals to interact with other communities. This challenge is compounded at posts with short tours of duty, which include many in the Muslim world. According to data provided by State, the average tour length at posts in the Muslim world is about 22 percent shorter than tour lengths elsewhere. Noting the prevalence of one-year tours in the Muslim world, a senior official at State told us that Public Affairs officers who have shorter tours tend to produce less effective work than officers with longer tours.

To address these challenges, we recommended in 2003 that the Secretary of State designate more administrative positions to overseas public affairs sections to reduce the administrative burden. Officials at State said that the Management bureau is currently considering options for reducing the administrative burden on posts, including the development of centralized administrative capabilities offshore. State is also repositioning several public diplomacy officers as part of its transformational diplomacy initiative; however, this represents a shift of existing public diplomacy officers and does not increase the overall number of officers in the department.

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### Language Deficiencies Pronounced, Especially in the Muslim World

In 2005, 24 percent of language-designated public diplomacy positions were filled by officers without the requisite language proficiency, similar to our findings in 2003. At posts in the Muslim world, this shortfall is even greater, with 30 percent of public diplomacy positions filled by officers without sufficient language skills. This figure is primarily composed of languages that are considered difficult to master, such as Arabic and Persian, but also includes languages considered easier to learn, such as French.

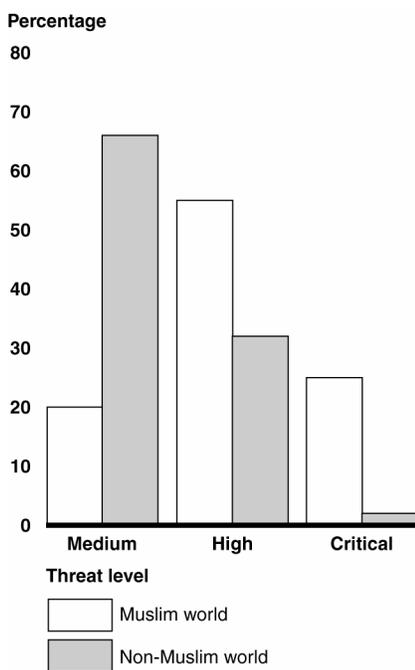
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### Embassies Must Balance Security and Public Outreach

Security concerns have limited embassy outreach efforts and public access, forcing public diplomacy officers to strike a balance between safety and mission. Shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell stated, "Safety is one of our top priorities... but it can't be at the expense of the mission." While posts

around the world have faced increased threats, security concerns are particularly acute in countries with significant Muslim populations, where the threat level for terrorism is rated as “critical” or “high” in 80 percent of posts (see fig. 2).

**Figure 2: Terrorist Threat Ratings for Posts in the Muslim and non-Muslim Worlds, October 2005**



Source: State Department.

Security and budgetary concerns have led to the closure of publicly accessible facilities around the world, such as American Centers and Libraries. In Pakistan, for example, all of the American Centers have closed for security reasons; the last facility, in Islamabad, closed in February 2005. These same concerns have prevented the establishment of a U.S. presence elsewhere. As a result, embassies have had to find other venues for public diplomacy programs, and some activities have been moved onto embassy compounds, where precautions designed to improve security have had the ancillary effect of sending the message that the United States is unapproachable and distrustful, according to State officials. Concrete barriers and armed escorts contribute to this perception, as do requirements restricting visitors’ use of cell phones and pagers within the embassy. According to one official in Pakistan, visitors to the embassy’s reference library have fallen to as few as one per day

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because many visitors feel humiliated by the embassy's rigorous security procedures.

Other public diplomacy programs have had to limit their publicity to reduce the risk of becoming a target. A recent joint USAID-State report concluded that "security concerns often require a 'low profile' approach during events, programs or other situations, which, in happier times, would have been able to generate considerable good will for the United States."<sup>9</sup> This constraint is particularly acute in Pakistan, where the embassy has had to reduce certain speaker and exchange programs.

State has responded to security concerns and the loss of publicly accessible facilities through a variety of initiatives, including American Corners, which are centers that provide information about the United States, hosted in local institutions and staffed by local employees. According to State data, there are currently approximately 300 American Corners throughout the world, including more than 90 in the Muslim world, with another 75 planned (more than 40 of which will be in the Muslim world). However, two of the posts we visited in October 2005 were having difficulty finding hosts for American Corners, as local institutions fear becoming terrorist targets.

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

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## Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

For questions regarding this testimony, please contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov. Individuals making key contributions to this statement include Diana Glod, Assistant Director; Michael ten Kate; Robert Ball; and Joe Carney.

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<sup>9</sup>USAID, *Operating in High Threat Environments* (Washington, D.C.: June 2005).

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