

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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<http://oversight.house.gov>

November 24, 2015

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro  
Comptroller General of the United States  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

During the last few years, the United States has drawn down, evacuated, closed, and reopened several embassies and consulates. The Benghazi Accountability Review Board (ARB) recommended that the Department of State “urgently review the proper balance between acceptable risk and expected outcomes in high risk, high threat areas” and noted that “assessments must be made on a case-by-case basis and repeated as circumstances change.”<sup>1</sup>

To address this recommendation, in 2013 State began to develop the Vital Presence Validation Process (VP2), which was approved on April 28, 2014. State describes VP2 as an institutionalized, repeatable, and transparent decision-making process used to determine when to begin, restart, continue, or discontinue operations, or to modify the current staffing levels, at a high-threat post. According to State’s Foreign Affairs Manual, the VP2 is used to annually review the U.S. presence at all posts on the High-Threat, High-Risk post (HTHR) list, as well as on an *ad hoc* basis, such as to respond to local events like deteriorating security, or a policy decision that causes the department to reconsider presence.

U.S. posts in the Middle East and Northern Africa are under threat due to the continued and unpredictable turmoil throughout those regions. In light of the recent partial withdrawal of embassy staff in Baghdad and the discontinuation of embassy operations in Tripoli and Sana’a, we request that the Government Accountability Office examine the State Department’s policies and procedures for evacuations, post closures, and post reopenings as well as the *ad hoc* use of VP2 in decisions concerning potential evacuations, the discontinuation of operations at a post, and the potential reopening of a post. Specifically, we request that GAO address the following questions:

1. What are the Department’s current policies and procedures concerning drawdowns, evacuations, post closures, and post re-openings, including the policies and procedures governing the modification of U.S. and locally employed staff, and the services provided to U.S. citizens at those posts?

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<sup>1</sup> *Report on Benghazi Attack*, U.S. Dep’t of State (Dec. 19, 2012), at 8.

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2. Who is eligible for the allowances?
3. How much is the Department spending annually on these allowances?
4. How does the Department establish the rates for these allowances, how frequently do the rates change, and how often does the Department update its methods for calculating these rates and determining the locations that receive them?
5. What mechanisms does the Department have in place to ensure allowances are provided only to eligible employees, including tools and strategies to limit fraud, waste, and abuse?
6. How has the Department assessed the effectiveness of allowances on recruiting and retention?

The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform is the principal oversight Committee of the House of Representatives and may at "any time" investigate "any matter" as set forth in House Rule X.

If you have any questions about this request, please contact Art Arthur or Cordell Hull of the Majority staff at (202) 225-5074, or Valerie Shen of the Minority staff at (202) 225-5051. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Jason Chaffetz  
Chairman



Elijah E. Cummings  
Ranking Member