GAO

United States Government Accountability Office

Report to Congressional Requesters

June 2024

STATE DEPARTMENT

Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations Should Better Track Its Performance

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Why GAO Did This Study

Conflict, instability, and violence continue to pose threats around the world, including to U.S. national security interests. In 2011, State established CSO to focus on conflict prevention, crisis response, and stabilization. In 2015, State's Inspector General (IG) reported that CSO had not resolved fundamental issues related to its mission, structure, and staffing that the IG had identified a year earlier.

GAO was asked to review CSO's operations. This report examines (1) how CSO's roles have changed since FY 2016, (2) the extent to which CSO followed performance management practices, and (3) relevant U.S. agencies' perspectives on CSO's collaboration efforts since 2021. GAO analyzed State data and reviewed agency documents such as strategies and policies. GAO also interviewed 29 officials from State, USAID, and DOD on their experiences collaborating with CSO.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations, that State (1) require a target for each of its performance indicators and (2) fully document its performance management process, such as the annual assessments of targets and data reliability. State partially agreed with recommendation 1 and agreed with recommendation 2. GAO maintains that State should set targets for all of its performance indicators.

View GAO-24-106238. For more information, contact Nagla'a El-Hodiri at (202) 512-7279 or elhodirin@gao.gov.
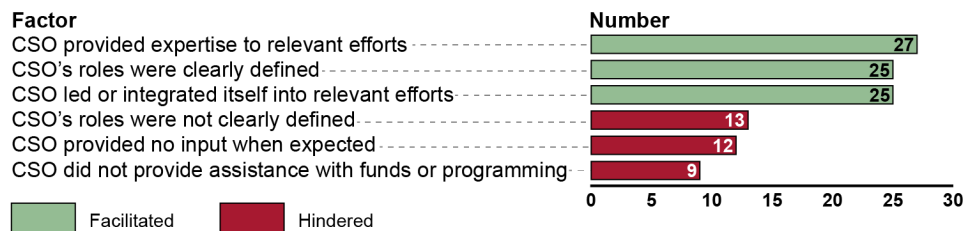
What GAO Found

In recent years, the Department of State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) has taken a leading role in implementing laws and strategies on conflict prevention. Specifically, CSO has a new role coordinating interagency planning and implementation of a 2020 strategy to prevent conflict and stabilize conflict-affected areas abroad over 10 years. CSO officials said this strategy is a top priority for the bureau. CSO has focused its existing efforts—data analysis, staff deployments, programming, and planning—on the strategy's implementation. For example, CSO has deployed staff to help implement the strategy in priority countries.

CSO followed some, but not all, key practices that federal agencies can implement to manage their performance. CSO defined its desired outcomes but did not fully implement other practices related to measuring performance and using performance information. For example, CSO did not set fiscal year (FY) 2022 targets for eight of its 25 performance indicators, such as the number of times users viewed the Instability Monitoring and Analysis Platform. With a target for each indicator, CSO would be better positioned to fully assess its performance and identify any gaps. CSO also did not fully document its annual performance review. For example, CSO did not document how it reviewed the targets for its performance indicators in FY 2022, including its reasons for deciding not to change any of them, even those it had met. Such documentation would allow CSO to preserve knowledge of its analyses and decisions, be better positioned to act on this knowledge, and maintain consistency in its annual reviews.

Officials from State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Department of Defense (DOD) identified factors that affected their collaboration with CSO. For example, 27 officials said that the expertise CSO provided to relevant efforts facilitated effective collaboration. In another example, 13 officials said that CSO's roles were not clearly defined in experiences where collaboration could have been improved. CSO requests and collects feedback on its collaboration efforts to understand the factors that facilitated or hindered collaboration. CSO collects such feedback through employee performance evaluations and surveys, among other tools.

Top Three Factors That Facilitated or Hindered Collaboration with CSO, as Identified in a Number of Interviews with State, USAID, and DOD Officials

Factor	Number
CSO provided expertise to relevant efforts	27
CSO's roles were clearly defined	25
CSO led or integrated itself into relevant efforts	25
CSO's roles were not clearly defined	13
CSO provided no input when expected	12
CSO did not provide assistance with funds or programming	9

Legend: Facilitated / Hindered

Legend: CSO = Department of State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations.

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with 29 officials from the Department of State (State), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and Department of Defense (DOD). | GAO-24-106238

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Abbreviations

Atrocity Prevention Strategy	2022 U.S. Strategy to Anticipate, Prevent, and Respond to Atrocities
bureau strategy	Functional Bureau Strategy
CSO	Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations
DOD	Department of Defense
Elie Wiesel Act	Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2018
FTE	full-time equivalent
FY	fiscal year
GFA	Global Fragility Act of 2019
GTM	Bureau of Global Talent Management
Stability Strategy	2020 U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability
Task Force	White House-led Atrocity Prevention Task Force
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

GAO

U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

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June 11, 2024

The Honorable Gregory Meeks
Ranking Member
Committee on Foreign Affairs
House of Representatives

The Honorable Sara Jacobs
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Africa
Committee on Foreign Affairs
House of Representatives

Conflict, instability, and violence continue to pose threats around the world. Conflict imposes human and financial costs ranging from food insecurity to displacement that undermine global peace, security, and sustainable development. Conflict is widespread, affecting at least 50 countries and one in six people as of January 2024, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project.[1] Preventing conflict and promoting stability in fragile and conflict-affected countries remain important to U.S. national security interests. For example, persistent armed conflicts create instability that terrorist and criminal organizations can exploit, directly affecting the interests of the U.S. and its allies.[2]

In 2011, the Department of State established the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) to focus on conflict prevention, crisis response, and stabilization.[3] CSO's mission is to anticipate, prevent, and respond to conflict that undermines U.S. interests. CSO is to collaborate

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[1]Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, *ACLED Conflict Index* (Jan. 2024), accessed March 15, 2024, https://acleddata.com/conflict-index/. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project conducts disaggregated data collection, analysis, and crisis mapping.

[2]Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development, and Department of Defense, *Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas* (2018).

[3]State established CSO to be "the institutional locus for policy and operational solutions for crisis, conflict, and instability" as directed by the first *Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review*. See Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development, *Leading through Civilian Power: The First Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review* (2010). CSO subsumed State's Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization, which State established in 2004 to plan, implement, and coordinate whole-of-government reconstruction and stabilization efforts.

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with other State bureaus and offices, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of Defense (DOD), and other U.S. government entities to fulfill this mission.

In 2014, State's Inspector General reported weaknesses in its inspection of CSO and issued 43 recommendations.[4] CSO has taken steps to address many of the weaknesses identified and, since 2015, has addressed the recommendations issued in the inspection and follow-up report.[5] However, more than 10 years after CSO's establishment, questions remain about its operations and role.

You asked us to review CSO's operations. This report (1) examines how, if at all, CSO's roles, efforts, and resources have changed since fiscal year (FY) 2016; (2) assesses the extent to which CSO followed key practices to assess and improve its performance management; and (3) examines relevant U.S. agencies' perspectives on collaboration with CSO since 2021 in selected countries.

To examine how, if at all, CSO's roles, efforts, and resources have changed since FY 2016—building on State's Inspector General's 2015 follow-up report—we reviewed documents such as CSO's Functional Bureau Strategies (bureau strategy), which are 4-year plans that outline the bureau's priorities.[6] We also analyzed State data on CSO's funds and staff from FYs 2016 through 2023. To assess the reliability of these data, we reviewed them for missing entries, reviewed documentation about the data, and interviewed State officials. We found the data to be sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our reporting objectives.

To assess the extent to which CSO followed key practices to assess and improve its performance management, we compared CSO's performance management processes from 2021 through 2023 to key performance management steps and related practices that we had identified in prior

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[4]Department of State Office of Inspector General, *Inspection of the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations*, ISP-I-14-06 (Arlington, VA: March 2014).

[5]In 2015, State's Inspector General conducted a follow-up review of CSO and reported that CSO had not resolved fundamental issues related to its mission, organizational structure, and staffing. See Department of State Office of Inspector General, *Compliance Follow-Up Review of the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations*, ISP-C-15-13 (Arlington, VA: February 2015).

[6]CSO has updated its bureau strategy four times since FY 2016, the period covered by our review.

work.[7] Since CSO works with a wide range of partners, we included a practice on involving stakeholders in defining missions and desired outcomes that we had identified in other prior work.[8] We focused on this time period because CSO revised its bureau strategy and indicators during its first strategic annual review in 2021, according to CSO officials. We reviewed State documents, including CSO's most recent bureau strategy in 2022, guidance related to the bureau strategy and performance management, and CSO's documentation of its performance management. We also interviewed officials from State's Functional Bureau Strategy Support Team from the Office of Foreign Assistance and the Bureau of Budget and Planning.

To examine relevant U.S. agencies' perspectives on collaboration with CSO since 2021 in selected countries, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a non-generalizable sample of 29 agency officials to learn about their experiences collaborating with CSO. We interviewed officials from other State bureaus, USAID, and DOD—the primary agencies implementing the U.S. government's conflict and stabilization efforts. We focused on CSO's collaboration efforts since 2021 so that officials could provide recent examples. In identifying officials to interview, we focused on CSO's collaboration with State and USAID efforts related to Colombia, Ethiopia, and Mozambique. We selected these countries on the basis of their geographic region and whether they are the location of CSO and interagency in-country efforts, among other factors. To identify DOD officials, we focused on CSO's collaboration with the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy and four geographic combatant commands where CSO has assigned long-term advisors.[9]

We identified and selected officials from other State bureaus, USAID, and DOD to obtain a range of (1) offices and locations, (2) topics of

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[7]GAO, *Coast Guard: Additional Actions Needed to Improve Commercial Fishing Vessel Safety Efforts*, GAO-23-105289 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 2, 2022). GAO, *Executive Guide: Effectively Implementing the Government Performance and Results Act*, GGD-96-118 (Washington, D.C.: June 1996) In this guide, we identified three key steps and additional practices within each step that federal agencies can implement to improve their overall performance. The steps and practices identified within this guide were drawn from our previous studies of leading public sector organizations that were successfully pursuing management reform initiatives and becoming more results oriented.

[8]GGD-96-118 and GAO, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts*, GAO-23-105460 (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2023).

[9]The four geographic commands are U.S. Africa Command, U.S. Central Command, U.S. European Command, and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.

collaboration with CSO, and (3) frequency of collaboration with CSO since 2021. We analyzed information from these interviews to identify factors that facilitated or hindered collaboration with CSO. We also compared officials' perspectives with selected leading collaboration practices identified in our prior work.[10] Our findings are not generalizable but provide a variety of perspectives on CSO's collaborative efforts.

We interviewed CSO officials for all three objectives. See appendix I for more information about our scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2022 to June 2024 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.

Background

U.S. Approaches to Prevent Conflict and Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas

Various policies, laws, and strategies have framed U.S. approaches to preventing conflict and stabilizing conflict-affected areas over time. For example:

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[10]We specifically asked agency officials whether the following selected leading collaboration practices were aligned with the factors that facilitated or hindered effective collaboration with CSO: define common outcomes, ensure accountability, clarify roles and responsibilities, and include relevant participants. We determined these practices were the most relevant to CSO's collaboration efforts on the basis of issues raised in our previous interviews with agency officials about CSO's collaboration. For more information on these and other leading collaboration practices, see GAO, *Government Performance Management: Leading Practices to Enhance Interagency Collaboration and Address Crosscutting Challenges*, GAO 23-105520 (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2023).

- *Stabilization Assistance Review.* State, USAID, and DOD reviewed past stabilization efforts in conflict-affected areas and issued the *Stabilization Assistance Review* in 2018 as a new policy framework to improve the effectiveness of U.S. efforts to stabilize conflict-affected areas. CSO led the review with the Office of Foreign Assistance on behalf of State. The review identified principles that enable effective stabilization efforts, including setting realistic, analytically backed goals; using data and evaluations to assess progress; and deploying civilian stabilization experts to work with deployed military elements.

- **The Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2018 (Elie Wiesel Act).**[11] The Elie Wiesel Act became law in 2019 and states it is U.S. policy to regard the prevention of atrocities as in the national interest.[12] In response to the Elie Wiesel Act, the 2022 U.S. Strategy to Anticipate, Prevent, and Respond to Atrocities (Atrocity Prevention Strategy) outlines a whole-of-government approach to prevent, respond to, and recover from atrocities.[13] The White House-led Atrocity Prevention Task Force (Task Force) coordinates whole-of-government atrocity prevention and response efforts, including this strategy's implementation.[14] National Security Council staff lead the Task Force, which is an Interagency Policy Committee composed of officials from State, USAID, DOD, the Departments of Homeland Security, Justice, and the Treasury, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Intelligence Community.[15] According to the Atrocity Prevention Strategy, the Task Force directs its efforts in up to 30 priority countries it has identified to be most at risk for atrocities.

- **The Global Fragility Act of 2019 (GFA).**[16] The GFA became law in 2019 and states it is U.S. policy to seek to stabilize conflict-affected

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[11]Pub. L. No. 115-441, 132 Stat. 5586 (Jan. 14, 2019).

[12]Atrocities are defined as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide, under the Elie Wiesel Act.

[13]The Elie Wiesel Act provides that it shall be the policy of the U.S. to pursue a government-wide strategy to identify, prevent, and respond to the risk of atrocities.

[14]The Task Force was formerly known as the Atrocity Prevention Board and the Atrocity Early Warning Task Force.

[15]The National Security Council's Interagency Policy Committees manage the development and implementation of national security policies by multiple U.S. government agencies, according to a 2021 National Security Memorandum.

[16]Pub. L. No. 116-94, Div. J, Title V, 133 Stat. 3060 (Dec. 20, 2019).

areas and prevent violence and fragility globally.[17] The GFA also established two funds in the U.S. Treasury to support such efforts.[18] The 2020 U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (Stability Strategy) establishes a new framework for U.S. government efforts to prevent conflict, stabilize conflict-affected areas, and address global fragility in response to the GFA.[19] This 10-year strategy provides an overarching conflict prevention and stabilization framework that integrates other whole-of-government approaches, such as the *Stabilization Assistance Review*. State is the lead agency for executing this strategy and chairs a working-level interagency secretariat composed of State, USAID, and DOD officials.[20] The U.S. has partnered with the following priority countries and region to implement this strategy: (1) Haiti, (2) Libya, (3) Mozambique, (4) Papua New Guinea, and (5) a grouping of countries in the Coastal West Africa region composed of Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo.

U.S. Government Agencies' Roles

State, USAID, and DOD, representing diplomacy, development, and defense ("the 3Ds"), respectively, are the primary U.S. agencies with

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[17]Fragility refers to a country's or region's vulnerability to armed conflict, large-scale violence, or other instability, including an inability to manage transnational threats or significant shocks, according to the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability.

[18]GFA established the Prevention and Stabilization Fund to be administered by State and USAID to support stabilization of conflict-affected areas and to mitigate fragility, including through the Global Fragility Strategy, and authorized up to $200 million annually for the fund for FYs 2020 through 2024. This fund replaced the Relief and Recovery Fund. GFA also established the Complex Crises Fund to be administered by USAID to support programs and activities to prevent or respond to emerging or unforeseen events overseas, including to support the Global Fragility Strategy, and authorized $30 million annually for the fund for FYs 2020 through 2024.

[19]In 2020, State, USAID, DOD, and Treasury submitted the Stability Strategy to Congress in response to section 504(a) of GFA, which required the development of a 10-year Global Fragility Strategy.

[20]The Secretariat will provide administrative functions to advance the strategy's implementation under the guidance of a senior level Steering Committee. The committee is convened by the National Security Council or its designee and comprises State, USAID, DOD, Treasury, and the Office of Management and Budget, according to the Stability Strategy.

roles related to conflict prevention and stabilization.[21] Table 1 describes these agencies' roles as described in the *Stabilization Assistance Review* and Stability Strategy.

Table 1: Primary U.S. Government Agencies' Roles Related to Conflict Prevention and Stabilization

Agency	Roles
Department of State	Lead agency for U.S. stabilization efforts. State implements foreign policy to advance diplomatic and political efforts with local partners, bilateral partners, and multilateral bodies. State also oversees the planning and implementation of justice sector, law enforcement, and other security sector assistance to stabilize conflict-affected areas and prevent violence and fragility globally.
U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)	Lead implementing agency for international development, disaster, and non-security prevention and stabilization assistance. USAID works to strengthen coherence across development, humanitarian, and other non-security assistance efforts in fragile countries and regions.
Department of Defense (DOD)	Supporting element for managing and preventing conflict and addressing global fragility through such specialized activities as capacity-building and security cooperation. DOD provides requisite security and reinforces civilian efforts where appropriate and consistent with available authorities.

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. agency documents. | GAO-24-106238

Note: To identify the roles of these agencies, we analyzed the 2018 *Stabilization Assistance Review*, issued by State, USAID, and DOD, and the 2020 U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability.

Fragility refers to a country's or region's vulnerability to armed conflict, large-scale violence, or other instability, including an inability to manage transnational threats or other significant shocks, according to the 2020 U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability.

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[21]Since multiple federal agencies are involved in U.S. conflict prevention and stabilization efforts, these efforts are fragmented. We have defined fragmentation as those circumstances in which more than one federal agency (or more than one organization within an agency) is involved in the same broad area of national need and opportunities exist to improve service delivery. See GAO, *Fragmentation, Overlap, and Duplication: An Evaluation and Management Guide*, GAO-15-49SP (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 14, 2015).

CSO Has Had a Leading Role Implementing Recent Laws on Conflict Prevention with Generally Consistent Efforts and Varying Resources since FY 2016

CSO Has Taken a Leading Role in Implementing Recent Laws on Conflict Prevention

CSO's mission to anticipate, prevent, and respond to conflict that undermines U.S. interests has been generally consistent since FY 2016, according to our analysis of CSO's bureau strategies. Similarly, CSO officials said the bureau's roles and responsibilities have also been largely consistent since 2016. The bureau is responsible for the following, among other things, according to State's *Foreign Affairs Manual:*[22]

- leading the formulation and implementation of U.S. conflict prevention and stabilization strategies, policies, and programs;[23]

- advancing conflict prevention and stabilization analysis, programs, and operations in coordination with relevant State bureaus and other agencies; and

- working with other agencies to strengthen U.S. government analysis, planning, and response activities related to violence prevention, atrocity early warning, and the peaceful resolution of conflict.

In recent years, CSO has taken on new and expanded roles leading interagency coordination and State's implementation of the following laws and associated strategies related to conflict prevention.

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[22]1 *Foreign Affairs Manual* 471.1, Responsibilities. These responsibilities are assigned to the Assistant Secretary for CSO, who leads the bureau and is the Secretary of State's senior advisor on conflict prevention and stabilization.

[23]The Assistant Secretary is responsible for leading the formulation and implementation of U.S. conflict prevention and stabilization strategies, policies, and programs under the overall direction of and in coordination with the Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights. 1 *Foreign Affairs Manual* 471.1, Responsibilities.

GFA and the Stability Strategy. CSO assumed a new role managing the Stability Strategy's Secretariat, the working-level interagency administrative body.[24] In this role, CSO coordinates interagency planning and implementation of the 2020 Stability Strategy, which outlines a new U.S. approach to help move countries from fragility to stability and from conflict to peace. The Secretariat is responsible for

- sharing information with relevant agencies about the strategy;

- providing guidance on the strategy's implementation in the priority countries and region; and

- ensuring policy, program, and process adherence to the GFA, among other things.

CSO helped develop the strategy, select priority countries, and draft country plans, according to CSO officials. CSO is also State's lead for implementing this 10-year strategy.[25]

Elie Wiesel Act and Atrocity Prevention Strategy. CSO serves as the White House-led Atrocity Prevention Task Force's Secretariat.[26] CSO's role as the Secretariat expanded to include coordinating interagency implementation of the 2022 Atrocity Prevention Strategy developed in response to the Elie Wiesel Act. CSO officials said they helped draft the government-wide strategy and ensure U.S. activities align with it. CSO has also published an annual report describing U.S. efforts related to atrocity prevention and response as called for by the Elie Wiesel Act.[27] As State's longstanding lead for atrocity prevention and in response to the Elie Wiesel Act, CSO aims to enhance U.S. efforts to detect, prevent, and

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[24]CSO officials said they began leading interagency working-level efforts to implement GFA in January 2020 and have managed the Secretariat since it was established in September 2022.

[25]The Assistant Secretary for CSO is responsible for implementing the GFA, according to State's *Foreign Affairs Manual*. State's Office of Foreign Assistance also plays a role in implementing the Stability Strategy, including by administering the Prevention and Stabilization Fund for State, according to CSO officials, and leading an interagency monitoring, evaluation, and learning team, according to the Secretariat's Terms of Reference.

[26]CSO officials said the bureau provided Secretariat support to the Task Force's predecessor, the Atrocity Prevention Board, beginning in 2014.

[27]Pub. L. No. 115-41, § 5(a). The Elie Wiesel Act required a report to Congress within 180 days of its enactment and annually thereafter for 6 years.

respond to atrocities against civilians and is responsible for implementing the Atrocity Prevention Strategy.[28]

CSO's Efforts to Achieve Its Mission Have Been Generally Consistent

CSO's efforts to achieve its mission have been generally consistent since FY 2016, according to our analysis of CSO's bureau strategies. CSO conducts the following efforts to advance U.S. foreign policy related to conflict prevention and stabilization.

Analysis. CSO conducts research and analysis, producing various data analytics.[29] In particular, CSO developed the Instability Monitoring and Analysis Platform, which tracks global conflict trends, maps armed actors, and models negotiations, among other things. For example, the platform includes a dashboard that forecasts the risk of violence in upcoming elections, as shown in figure 1.

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[28]The Assistant Secretary for CSO is responsible for leading the formulation and implementation of atrocity prevention policies and strategies, serving as State's senior representative in interagency atrocity prevention coordination bodies and ensuring efforts are coordinated with other relevant State bureaus, according to State's *Foreign Affairs Manual*.

[29]Data analytics involve a variety of techniques to analyze and interpret data to facilitate decision-making.

Figure 1: State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations' (CSO) Electoral Violence Risk Dashboard
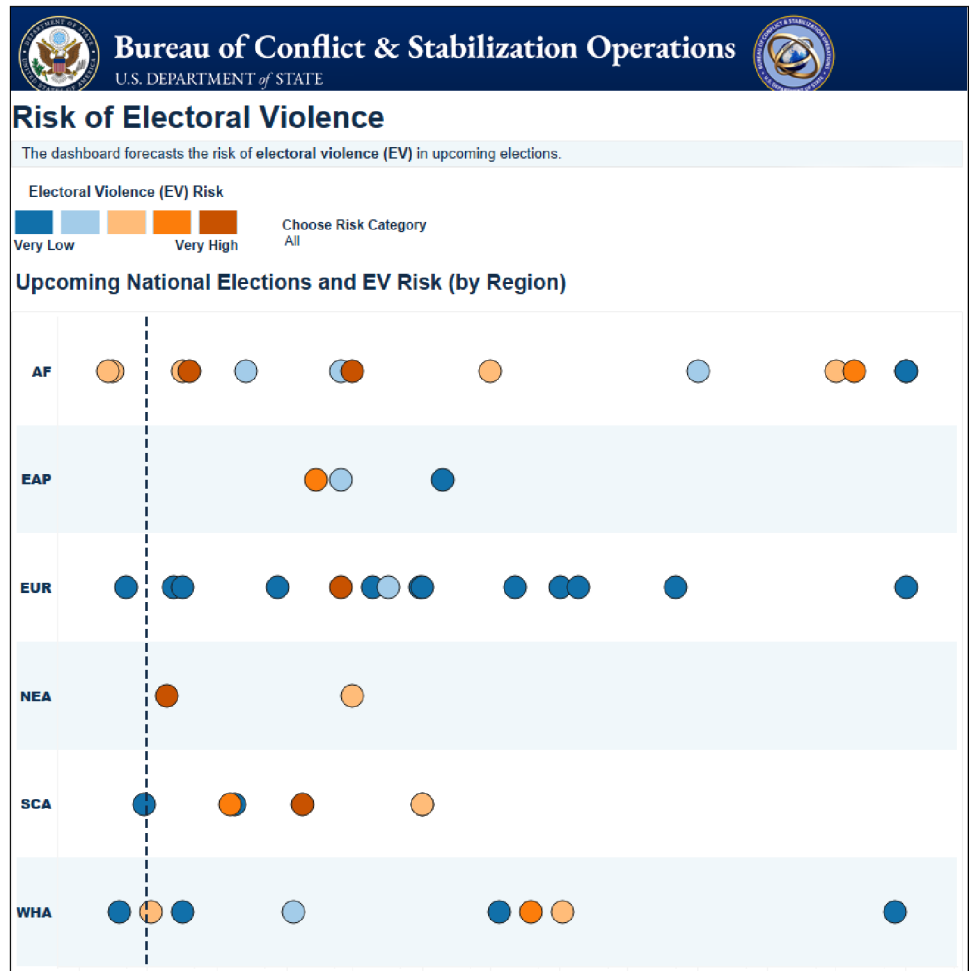
Legend: AF = Sub-Saharan Africa, EAP = East Asia and the Pacific; EUR = Europe and Eurasia; NEA= Middle East and North Africa; SCA = South and Central Asia; WHA = Western Hemisphere.

Source: Department of State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations. | GAO-24-106238

Note: The circles represent countries with upcoming elections. The figure shows an example of countries with elections in the calendar year, and the dashed line represents when the user accessed the dashboard, according to CSO officials.

Deployments. CSO deploys stabilization advisors on a short- or long-term basis to support U.S. embassies and DOD's geographic combatant commands. CSO officials said this presence is critical to CSO's activities and partnerships. Short-term advisors support U.S. embassies' diplomatic engagements related to conflict prevention and stabilization. For example, CSO deployed an advisor to the U.S. Embassy in Guinea for 5 months to

support the Stability Strategy's implementation. Long-term advisors serve 2- to 3-year terms, according to CSO officials, and conduct efforts ranging from providing technical expertise to facilitating civil-military coordination. As of November 2023, CSO had 11 long-term stabilization advisor positions located at U.S. embassies in Ghana, Haiti, Kenya, Mozambique, Niger, Papua New Guinea, and Ukraine and at four of DOD's seven geographic combatant commands: U.S. Africa Command, U.S. Central Command, U.S. European Command, and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.[30]

Programming. CSO designs, supports, and implements programs related to conflict prevention and stabilization. As of November 2023, CSO had obligated about $83 million to support 27 ongoing programs.[31] As shown in figure 2, most of CSO's obligated funds support ongoing programs in Ukraine (40 percent) and Sudan (34 percent). For example, CSO has programs that support reintegrating internally displaced persons in Ukraine and the peace process in Sudan.

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[30]Ghana, Haiti, Mozambique, and Papua New Guinea are priority countries under the Stability Strategy. CSO officials said they have conducted longstanding efforts in Kenya, Niger, and Ukraine.

[31]This amount reflects funds obligated for CSO's ongoing programs since they began. The obligated funds for CSO programs include those provided by other State entities or agencies for CSO to implement specific programs, according to State data.

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Figure 2: Funds Obligated for State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations' (CSO) Current Programs, as of November 2023
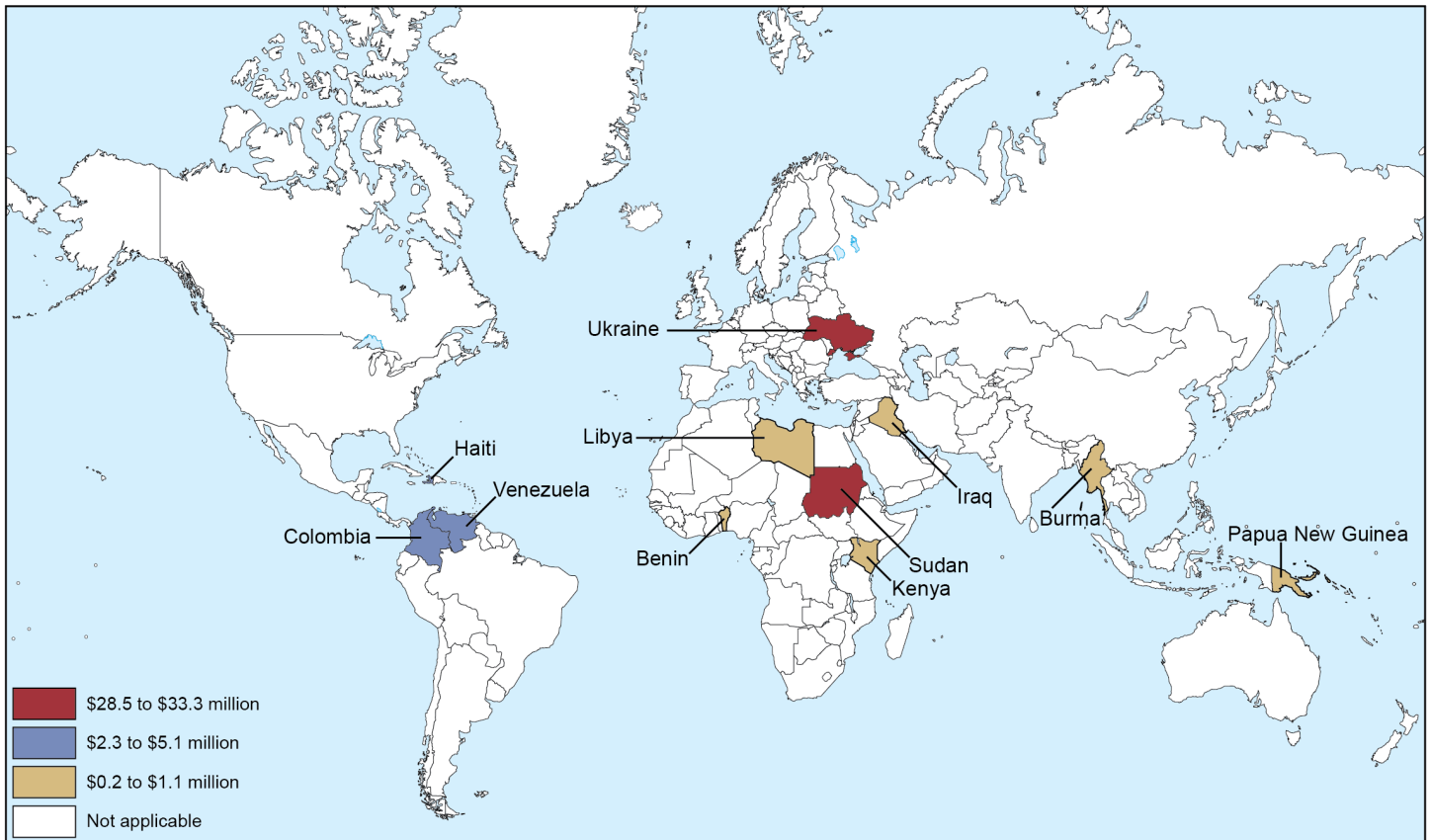
Source: GAO (analysis); Department of State (data); Map Resources (map). | GAO-24-106238

Note: The amounts depicted reflect funds obligated for CSO's ongoing programs since they began. The $7.9 million in funds obligated for CSO programs that are implemented in more than one country are not depicted. CSO officials said their programs are implemented through cooperative agreements, interagency agreements, and contracts. The obligated funds for CSO programs include those provided by another State entity or agency for CSO to implement specific programs, according to State data.

Planning. CSO supports strategic planning related to conflict prevention, response, and stabilization. For example, CSO developed a stabilization planning framework that U.S. embassies could apply when developing their integrated country strategies, according to a State document. CSO officials said they also conduct scenario planning and tabletop exercises with State, interagency, and international stakeholders. For example, CSO conducted a planning exercise on conflict prevention in the Asia-Pacific region with representatives from 13 countries.

Across these efforts, CSO provides support in the following ways:

- **Contributes technical expertise.** For example, CSO has a negotiations unit that supports U.S. diplomats engaged in peace processes and complex political negotiations. CSO is also the leading State entity on managing non-state armed groups, according to State's Congressional Budget Justification for FY 2022.

- **Works with U.S. government and international partners.** For example, CSO helped establish the Stabilization Leaders Forum, a network of governments with experience leading civilian stabilization responses. CSO officials said the forum has helped enhance burden sharing among partners, including Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, for efforts in Ukraine and West Africa.

- **Conducts monitoring and evaluation on conflict prevention and stabilization.** For example, CSO commissioned a $1.2 million evaluation of its programming in Ukraine. CSO officials said the evaluation will assess the impact of its work and help inform future programs.

In general, CSO's efforts have consistently focused on conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and security sector stabilization since FY 2016, according to our analysis of CSO's bureau strategies. Table 2 provides examples of CSO's efforts by these focus areas and related topics.

Negotiations Support Unit

In 2021, State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations established a team of peace process and negotiations experts, also known as a negotiations support unit. The unit provides tailored support to U.S. diplomats engaged in peace processes and complex political negotiations at every stage. For example, the unit conducts scenario planning and comparative analysis. The unit's expertise covers such subjects as power sharing and legal frameworks.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State documents. | GAO-24-106238

Table 2: Examples of State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations' (CSO) Efforts by Focus Area

Focus area	Topics	Examples of efforts
Conflict prevention	Atrocity prevention	In Ukraine, helped identify, track, and document possible atrocities.
	Electoral violence prevention	In Kenya, helped identify and monitor election violence hotspots.
Conflict resolution	Peace negotiations	In Ethiopia, worked with the U.S. Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa on the peace process and related negotiations.
	Ceasefires	In Sudan, helped monitor ceasefire violations.
	Peace agreements	In Colombia, helped monitor the implementation of the peace accord.
Security sector stabilization	Armed actors	In Venezuela, conducted a network analysis of non-state armed groups to help address armed actor financing and activities.
	Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of armed actors	In Uganda, developed procedures to facilitate the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of ex-combatants.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State documents and interviews with CSO officials. | GAO-24-106238

Our analysis of CSO's bureau strategies indicates CSO's goals have focused on supporting policy or diplomatic engagements since FY 2016. CSO officials said the bureau generally conducts its efforts in response to

policy initiatives and requests from such U.S. government entities as ambassadors, special envoys, and State's regional bureaus. These officials said one of CSO's primary efforts is providing technical expertise and capacity to policymakers and U.S. embassies that are addressing conflict-related challenges.

CSO has shifted its efforts to support priorities as they emerged. For example:

- State's Congressional Budget Justification for FY 2017 noted CSO would focus on such administration priorities as preventing atrocities and countering violent extremism, which were also included as two of the five core areas of focus in CSO's 2018 bureau strategy.[32]

- CSO focused its efforts on implementing the *Stabilization Assistance Review* framework once the framework was approved in 2018. For example, CSO officials said they deployed advisors to support U.S. embassies in implementing the framework's principles. CSO also supported seven U.S. embassies in reviewing and assessing their stabilization efforts, according to its 2022 bureau strategy.

Since the passage of the GFA and Elie Wiesel Act, CSO's top priority has been to implement these laws, and CSO has therefore focused its efforts on implementing the strategies associated with these laws, according to CSO officials. Table 3 provides examples of CSO's efforts to implement the Stability and Atrocity Prevention strategies, respectively. CSO officials said implementing the Atrocity Prevention Strategy is a smaller effort than implementing the Stability Strategy.

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[32]CSO's "five core areas of focus" also included defections and disengaged fighters, political and electoral violence, and peace processes, according to its 2018 bureau strategy.

Table 3: Examples of State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations' (CSO) Efforts to Implement U.S. Strategies Related to Conflict Prevention

Type of effort	Strategy	
	2020 U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability	**2022 U.S. Strategy to Anticipate, Prevent, and Respond to Atrocities**
Analysis	Produced data analyses that helped inform country selection process.	Produced quarterly early warning assessments of the likelihood of deliberate attacks against civilians.
Deployments	Established long-term stabilization advisor positions in four priority countries.	Deployed stabilization advisors to help assess atrocity risk in countries identified by the White House-led Atrocity Prevention Task Force.
Programming	As of November 2023, nine of CSO's ongoing programs related to the strategy's implementation, representing 15 percent of total obligations for CSO's programs.	Supported pilot programs in countries prioritized by the White House-led Atrocity Prevention Task Force.
Planning	Developed guidance materials to help U.S. embassies draft 10-year country and regional plans for the strategy's implementation.	Provided input on U.S. atrocity prevention and response planning for at-risk countries.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State documents and data and interviews with CSO officials. | GAO-24-106238

CSO's Funding Levels Have Varied since FY 2016, While Its Staffing Levels Have Increased since FY 2019

CSO's Funding for Operations Has Been Generally Stable since FY 2019, While Its Funding for Foreign Assistance Programming Has Varied since FY 2016

CSO's funding levels varied from FYs 2016 through 2023.[33] On average, CSO has received about $42 million annually since FY 2016, ranging from a low of $30 million in FY 2017 to a high of $80 million in FY 2022, according to our analysis of State data. CSO receives funds for its (1) operations and (2) foreign assistance programming and related activities. Of the $336 million CSO received from FYs 2016 through 2023, 65 percent was for operations and 35 percent was for foreign assistance programming and related activities. Figure 3 shows the funds CSO annually received for its operations and foreign assistance programming, respectively.

[33]CSO funds are those allocated to CSO, as well as those that CSO officials said were originally allocated to another State entity or agency and then provided to CSO to implement specific programs.

Figure 3: Funds for State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO), Fiscal Years 2016–2023
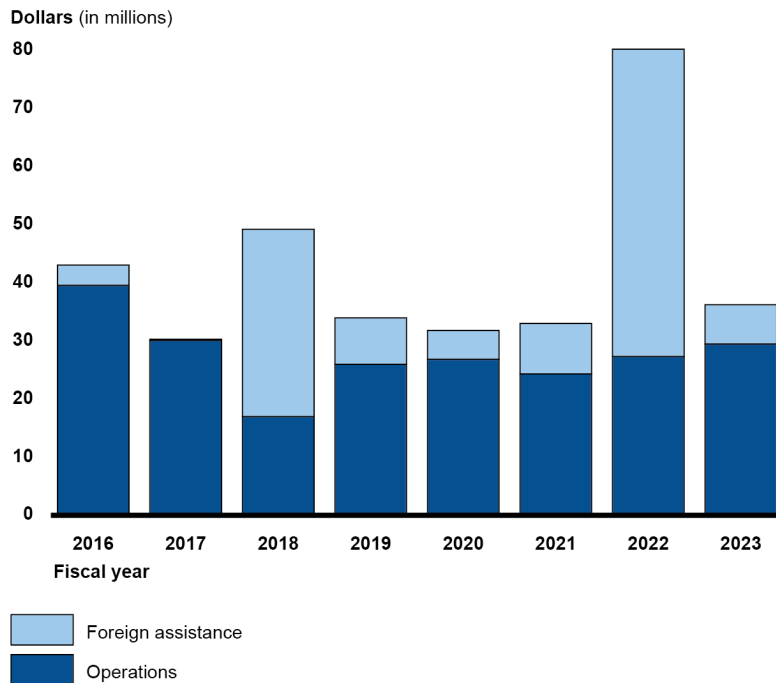
Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-24-106238

Note: The fiscal year represents the year in which CSO received the funds. CSO receives funds for its (1) operations and (2) foreign assistance programming and related activities. Funds for operations are those allocated to CSO. Funds for foreign assistance programming are those allocated to CSO, as well as those that CSO officials said were originally allocated to another State entity or agency and then provided to CSO to implement specific programs. CSO received $204,000 for foreign assistance programming in fiscal year 2017.

Operations. Our analysis of State data indicates the funds CSO received for its operations[34] have been generally stable since FY 2019.[35] On average, CSO received about $26.5 million annually for its operations since FY 2019.[36] CSO officials said these funds are used for salaries,

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[34]CSO has received funds for its operations from the Diplomatic Programs account, according to State data. CSO officials said the Diplomatic Programs account is the primary operating account for most State bureaus.

[35]From FYs 2016 to 2018, the funds CSO received for its operations varied.

[36]The funds CSO received for its operations from FYs 2019 through 2023 annually changed by 7 percent, on average.

information technology, and other operating costs, as well as such diplomatic engagement activities as negotiations support.[37]

Foreign assistance. Our analysis of State data indicates the funds CSO received for its foreign assistance programming and related activities have varied since FY 2016, ranging from a low of $204,000 in FY 2017 to a high of $52.9 million in FY 2022.[38] Funds for foreign assistance programming increased from $8.7 million in FY 2021 to $52.9 million in FY 2022, in part because CSO received funds from other State entities to

- implement programs in Ukraine that aim to document the impact of Russian military actions and support accountability for human rights violations, among other things (about $27.1 million);

- implement programs in Sudan that aim to support the ongoing political dialogue process, such as by improving citizen leaders' negotiation skills ($15 million); and

- help implement the Stability Strategy, including through a program that aims to support political reconciliation in Haiti (about $6.6 million).[39]

As shown in figure 4, our analysis of State data found that at least 50 percent of the funds CSO annually received for foreign assistance

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[37]Prior appropriations authorized the use of funds from the Diplomatic Programs account for conflict stabilization operations and related reconstruction and stabilization assistance to prevent or respond to conflict or civil strife in foreign countries or regions. CSO officials said they used such funds for foreign assistance-like programs from 2017 to 2020. See Pub. L. No. 115-31, Div. J, Title I, 131 Stat. 135, 589-91 (May 5, 2017). This account was entitled "Diplomatic and Consular Programs" at the time but was later renamed "Diplomatic Programs" under Pub. L. No. 116-6, Div. F, Title I, 133 Stat. 13, 268 (Feb. 15, 2019).

[38]CSO received funds for foreign assistance programming from the Economic Support Fund account, according to State data. CSO officials said CSO's funds for foreign assistance programming were lower in FY 2017 because it shifted its focus from programming to analytics, as directed by the Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights at the time.

[39]According to congressional notifications, these funds came from the Prevention and Stabilization Fund, which was established by GFA to support stabilization of conflict-affected areas and to mitigate fragility, including through the Stability Strategy. CSO officials said the Office of Foreign Assistance manages the fund's allocation process for State.

programming were originally allocated to another State entity or agency and then provided to CSO to implement specific programs.[40]

Figure 4: Funds for State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) for Foreign Assistance Programming and Related Activities, Fiscal Years 2016–2023
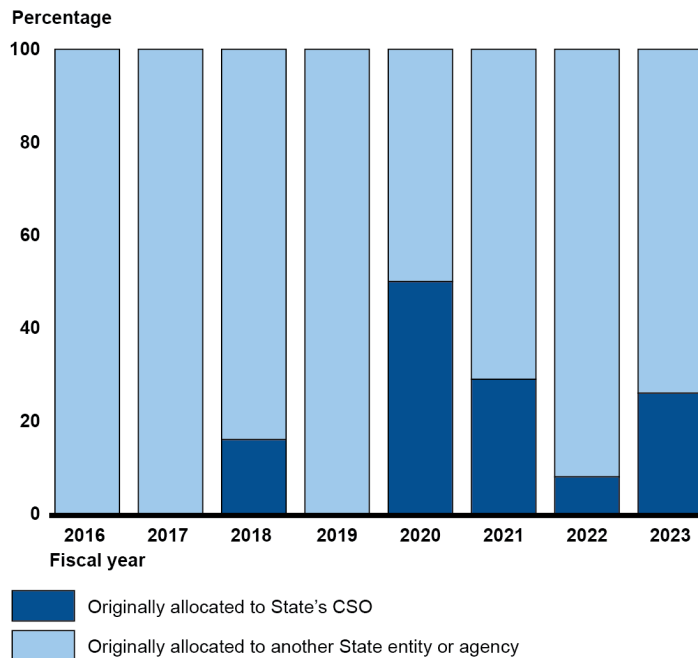
Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-24-106238

Note: Funds originally allocated to another State entity or agency were provided to CSO to implement specific programs, according to CSO officials. The fiscal year represents the year in which CSO received the funds.

CSO officials said the amount of funds CSO receives from other State entities or agencies is unpredictable and such funds cannot be directed to other efforts CSO may have identified as higher priority. CSO officials said the bureau receives these funds in two primary ways: (1) another State entity or agency provides funds to CSO for a specific purpose or (2) CSO requests funds by submitting proposals to other State entities or agencies. For example, CSO officials said they received funds for an

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[40]CSO received funds from another State entity or agency for foreign assistance programming from the following accounts, according to State data: Economic Support Fund; Assistance to Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia; Development Assistance; and International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement.

electoral violence prevention program in Burkina Faso after State's Office of Foreign Assistance approved their request.

CSO's Staffing Levels Have Increased by 54 Percent from FY 2019 to FY 2023

On average, CSO has had 100 authorized full-time equivalent (FTE) positions annually since FY 2016, with an increase from 81 positions in FY 2019 to 125 positions in FY 2023 (a 54 percent increase), according to our analysis of State data.[41] As shown in figure 5, the majority of CSO's authorized positions are for Civil Service employees based in the U.S.

Figure 5: State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations' (CSO) Authorized Full-Time Equivalent Position Types, Fiscal Years 2016–2023

Percentage

3%
Foreign Service (overseas)

16%
Foreign Service (domestic)

81%
Civil Service (domestic)
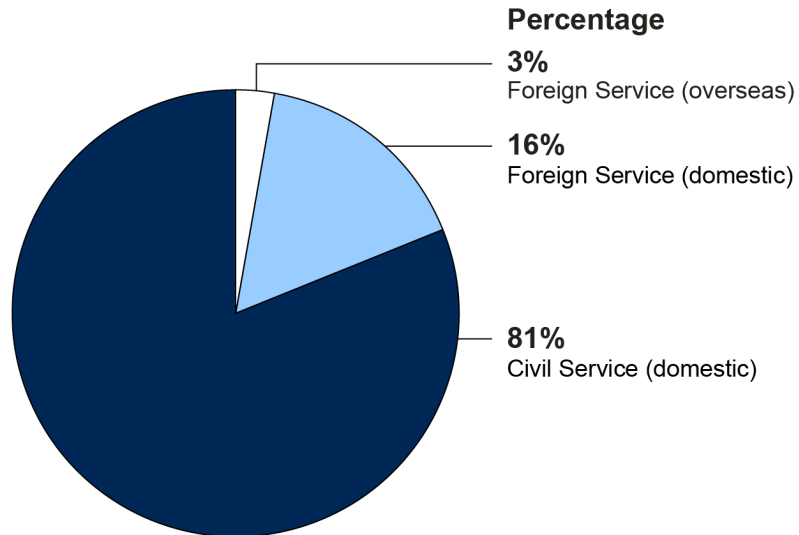
Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-24-106238

Note: The percentages depicted above represent the annual average. Domestic positions are those based in Washington, D.C., according to CSO officials.

Figure 6 shows the number of authorized FTE positions for CSO from FYs 2016 through 2023, along with the number of positions filled. On average, CSO has filled 98 FTE positions annually, ranging from 85 positions in FY 2016 to 115 positions in FY 2021.

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[41]State's Bureaus of Global Talent Management and Budget and Planning establish the authorized levels for all bureaus' FTE positions, according to State officials. In addition to authorized FTE positions, as of October 2023, CSO had 41 non-FTE positions (e.g., third-party contractors, detailees, and re-employed annuitants), according to CSO officials.

Figure 6: State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations' (CSO) Authorized and Filled Full-Time Equivalent Positions, Fiscal Years 2016–2023

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-24-106238

Note: Data are reported as of September 30 for each fiscal year.

CSO filled more positions than were authorized in FYs 2018, 2019, and 2021. State's Bureau of Global Talent Management (GTM) officials said that following the end of the hiring freeze in May 2018, they set the number of authorized positions for all State bureaus for 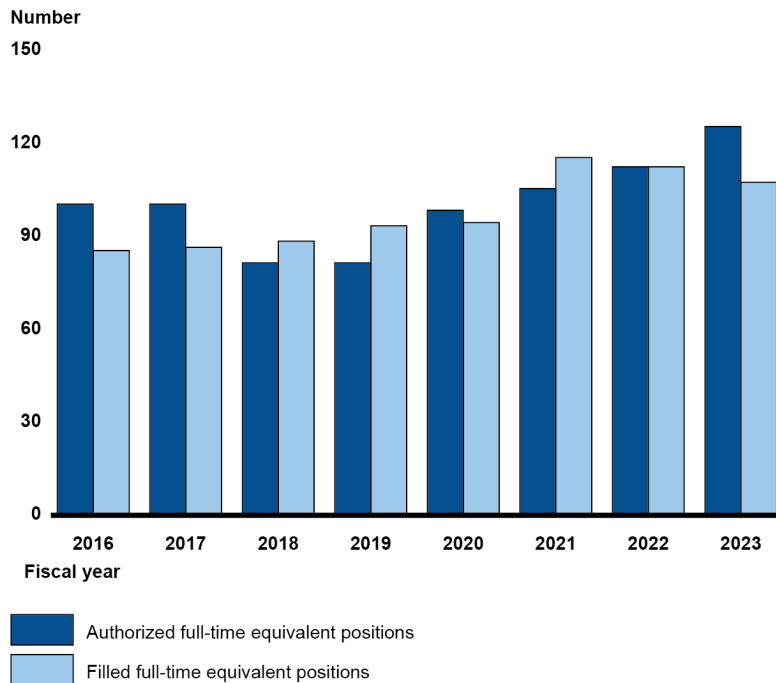FY 2018 to December 2017 employment levels.[42] This action decreased CSO's authorized positions from 100 in FY 2017 to 81 in FY 2018—the greatest decrease over this period, according to our analysis of State data. CSO officials said they continued to recruit for and fill vacant Foreign Service positions above the authorized level.[43] CSO was able to fill more positions than authorized because GTM had granted CSO an exception, enabling it to fill 100 total positions, according to State officials. CSO officials said

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[42]GTM officials said State instituted a hiring freeze in FY 2017 as directed by the President.

[43]Our analysis of State data indicates that on average, CSO filled more Foreign Service positions than were authorized—34 percent above the authorized level—from FYs 2016 through 2023.

GAO-24-106238 State Department

GTM requested the bureau reconcile the number of authorized and filled positions in 2021. These officials said CSO has made efforts to reconcile these positions as advised by GTM, including by eliminating vacant positions and requesting new positions in the Bureau Resource Request process.

CSO has increased its staffing levels to meet its new and expanded roles related to implementing recent laws and associated strategies, according to CSO officials. For example, CSO funded eight additional civil service positions from its resources in FY 2023, increasing its authorized positions. Moreover, CSO officials said they asked GTM to review the bureau's staffing in response to new demands related to implementing the Stability Strategy.[44] GTM officials said they completed their review in January 2024 and found that while CSO's organizational structure effectively supported implementing the Stability Strategy, it was not adequately staffed to expand its current efforts. See appendix II for CSO's organizational structure and the number of staff in each of its offices as of November 2023. GTM officials said they recommended CSO request additional funds to fill staffing gaps.

CSO Followed Some Key Performance Management Practices but Did Not Fully Set Targets or Document Its Annual Reviews

CSO followed some, but not all, key practices that could help it to better assess and improve its overall performance management. We have previously defined performance management as a three-step process by which organizations (1) set goals to identify the results they seek to achieve, (2) collect performance information to measure progress, and (3) use that information to assess results and inform decisions to ensure further progress toward achieving those goals.[45] See table 4 for our overall assessment of CSO's performance management processes compared with key steps and practices.[46]

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[44]We have previously described key principles of strategic workforce planning. See GAO, *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, GAO-04-39 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003).

[45]GAO-23-105460.

[46]See GAO-23-105289 for three steps and practices within each step that federal agencies can implement to improve their overall performance. See GGD-96-118 for the stakeholder practice used in this report. While State uses the 18 *Foreign Affairs Manual* 300 series as its governing policy for strategic planning and program monitoring and evaluation according to State officials, best practices from State are broadly consistent with these steps and practices.

Table 4: Assessment of State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations' (CSO) Performance Management Processes Compared with Key Performance Management Steps and Practices

Step 1: Define desired outcomes	●
Practice 1.1: Establish long-term strategic goals and related objectives to set a general direction for the program's effort.	●
Practice 1.2: For each strategic goal, establish one or more sub-objectives, which include a target level of performance and time frame, to define the specific results a program expects to achieve in the near term.	●
Practice 1.3: Involve stakeholders and customers in defining mission and desired outcomes.	●
Step 2: Measure performance	◗
Practice 2.1: For each sub-objective, establish one or more performance indicators to collect relevant information to assess program performance and progress towards the goal.	◗
Step 3: Use performance information	◗
Practice 3.1: Regularly use performance information to assess progress towards program goals and inform management decisions such as plans to expand effective approaches or address performance gaps.	◗

Legend: ●, ◗, and ○ denote that a step or practice is met, partially met, or not met, respectively.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State documents. | GAO-24-106238

Note: We compared CSO's performance management processes with key performance management steps and practices. For the latter, we used all the steps and practices from GAO-23-105289 and supplemented them with the practice on involving stakeholders in defining missions and desired outcomes from GGD-96-118 because CSO works with a wide range of partners.

We assessed a step as "met" when CSO's processes fully addressed each of the underlying practices; "partially met" when CSO's processes met some, but not all, of the underlying practices; and "not met" when CSO's processes did not meet any of the underlying practices.

We assessed a practice as "met" when CSO's processes addressed the practice, "partially met" when CSO's processes partially (but not completely) addressed the practice, and "not met" when CSO's processes did not address any of the practice.

We use "performance indicators" to include both indicators and milestones.

In Defining Desired Outcomes, CSO Consulted Stakeholders

We found that CSO met the first performance management step, define desired outcomes, by meeting each of the step's practices.

CSO established goals and objectives. CSO established three long-term strategic goals and eight related objectives in its 2022 bureau strategy. CSO officials said these goals and objectives set a general direction for CSO's efforts. For example, as shown in figure 7, CSO's first goal is to advance U.S. policy priorities to prevent and resolve violence and conflict, promote stability, and address fragility in regions of U.S. national priority.

Figure 7: Elements and Examples from State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations' (CSO) Functional Bureau Strategy

Elements	Examples from CSO's 2022 Functional Bureau Strategy
Goals Represent the long-term, ambitious vision of the bureau or mission.	Advance U.S. policy priorities to prevent and resolve violence and conflict, promote stability, and address fragility in regions of U.S. national priority.
Objectives Realistic, specific, and measurable end-states that bureaus/missions seek to achieve, or make significant progress on, in the life of the strategy.	Strengthen strategic prevention, conflict resolution, and security sector stabilization efforts through targeted programs clearly linked to U.S. policy objectives.
Sub-objectives Operationalize objectives. Must be specific, measurable, and shorter-term than the objectives they are nested under.	Anticipate, provide early warning of, and mitigate violent conflict, potential atrocities, election violence, and other forms of global political instability through targeted CSO programming.
Performance indicators Particular characteristic or dimension used to measure intended changes. Performance indicators are used to observe progress and to measure actual results compared to expected results.	Percentage of completed CSO programs addressing conflict prevention issues that meet their objectives.

Source: Department of State. | GAO-24-106238

Note: The elements are based on State's *Foreign Affairs Manual* (18 *Foreign Affairs Manual* 301.2 and 301.4). The examples are from CSO's Functional Bureau Strategy, approved January 7, 2022.

CSO established sub-objectives with target levels. CSO established at least one sub-objective for each of its objectives. For example, for the second objective, one of CSO's sub-objectives is to anticipate, provide early warning of, and mitigate conflict, potential atrocities, election violence, and other forms of global political instability through targeted CSO programming. CSO established target levels of performance for each sub-objective and time frames for 13 of its 16 sub-objectives. We determined that the three sub-objectives without an established time frame had implicit time frames.[47]

CSO involved stakeholders. CSO involved stakeholders when developing its 2022 bureau strategy, including defining its desired outcomes. Specifically, CSO solicited feedback on its bureau strategy

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[47]These three sub-objectives have indicators that track completed programs. CSO officials said they also annually review their sub-objectives. While these sub-objectives do not have explicit time frames, the associated performance indicators and CSO's annual review indicate an annual time frame.

from other State bureaus and offices, such as State's Functional Bureau Strategy Support Team, and Office of Policy, Planning and Resources for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.[48] Further, CSO officials said the CSO bureau strategy team met regularly to develop each section of the bureau strategy, often with officials from State's Bureau of Budget and Planning and Office of Foreign Assistance.[49]

CSO Collected Data but Did Not Set Targets for Eight of 25 Indicators to Measure Performance

We found that CSO partially met the second performance management step, measuring performance. Specifically, while CSO established performance indicators and collected relevant information, it did not consistently establish measurable targets for the performance indicators.[50] Our prior work identified having measurable targets as a key attribute of performance measures.[51] According to our prior work, numerical targets or other measurable values facilitate future assessments of whether overall goals and objectives are achieved because comparison can easily be made between projected performance and actual results.

CSO established performance indicators. CSO established at least one performance indicator for each of its sub-objectives.[52] For example, the percentage of completed CSO programs addressing conflict prevention issues that meet their objectives is one of CSO's performance

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[48]The Functional Bureau Strategy Support Team is led by State's Office of Foreign Assistance and the Bureau of Budget and Planning. The Functional Bureau Strategy Support Team provides guidance to bureaus as they develop their bureau strategy, including checklists that outline best practices to support performance management, according to State officials from the team.

[49]The team included representatives from CSO's Offices of Design, Monitoring, and Evaluation; African Affairs; Near Eastern Affairs; East Asian and Pacific and South and Central Asian Affairs; Western Hemisphere and European Affairs; Executive Director; Communications, Policy, and Partnerships, and Advanced Analytics.

[50]We use "performance indicators" to include both indicators and milestones.

[51]Our prior work emphasizes key attributes of effective performance measures, such as measurable targets. See GAO, *Tax Administration: IRS Needs to Further Refine Its Tax Filing Season Performance Measures*, GAO-03-143 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 22, 2002), 45, for a description of how we developed the attributes of effective performance goals and measures.

[52]Fifteen of the performance indicators measure outcomes, such as the percentage of completed CSO programs addressing conflict prevention issues that meet their objectives. The remaining 10 performance indicators measure output, such as the number of views of CSO's Instability Monitoring and Analysis Platform.

indicators under the sub-objectives related to targeted programs linked to U.S. policy objectives.

CSO collected relevant information. CSO collected information that was relevant to its performance indicators. CSO's Office of Design, Monitoring, and Evaluation coordinated the collection of performance data and facilitated the review process, according to CSO officials. For example, CSO collected data on the number of times users viewed the Instability Monitoring and Analysis Platform.

CSO did not set targets for all performance indicators. Although CSO collected performance data, it did not consistently set targets for each of its performance indicators. Specifically, CSO did not establish targets for eight of its 25 performance indicators for fiscal year 2022, according to our analysis of CSO documents.[53]

CSO officials said they did not establish targets for some performance indicators because they were waiting for additional information, such as baseline data, or did not have the staff to follow up to obtain this information. Our review of CSO documents indicates that five of the eight performance indicators already had baselines. CSO's officials also said that their mandate, to prevent conflict, is difficult to measure. Further, officials told us that CSO's supporting role makes it difficult to attribute success or conclusively determine CSO's contributing effect.

Officials from State's Functional Bureau Strategy Support Team told us that while there is no requirement to establish a target for each performance indicator, it is a best practice to do so. CSO plans to set targets for indicators that lack targets before the next strategic review, according to CSO officials.

With a target for each indicator, CSO would be better positioned to assess its performance and identify any gaps. The targets may also allow CSO to better direct its resources to performance areas where additional resources would be effective because they would help to address gaps. State officials from the Functional Bureau Strategy Support Team noted the usefulness of an indicator in measuring progress is limited when a

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[53]For instance, CSO did not set a fiscal year 2022 target for the number of views of the Instability Monitoring and Analysis Platform.

bureau has not set a target and, therefore, does not know what progress looks like.

CSO Did Not Fully Document Its Annual Performance Review Process

We found that CSO partially met the third performance management step, using performance information. Specifically, while CSO used performance information to review progress and to inform management decisions, it did not fully document its annual performance review process.

CSO used performance information to review progress. In May 2023, CSO discussed its performance internally during its annual strategic review. According to CSO officials, the bureau used performance information to review progress toward its goals, objectives, and sub-objectives during this annual review. CSO officials said they examined data collected for performance indicators, including those outlined in its bureau strategy. During the 2023 review, CSO discussed lessons learned and considered updates to the bureau strategy, including modifications to performance indicators and related objectives.

CSO used performance information to inform management decisions. CSO officials said that they briefed bureau leadership on the results of the annual strategic review. According to CSO officials, the 2023 review determined that CSO should increase its attention both to women, peace, and security, and to climate and conflict as policy priorities and within its foreign assistance programming to align with State's focus on these issues.

CSO did not fully document its review process. While CSO used performance information to review progress and inform decisions, CSO did not fully document its performance management process. CSO documented agendas, discussion questions, and certain outcomes of the annual strategic review. However, CSO did not document other parts of the process. For example, CSO did not fully document the steps in its annual strategic review, such as its annual assessments of targets and data reliability.

In addition, CSO reviewed targets during its annual strategic review, according to CSO officials, but did not document how it reviewed the targets. For example, CSO met existing targets for most performance indicators with established targets but did not document its rationale for maintaining each target at its prior level. Our analysis of CSO's documents indicates its performance surpassed the targets for these 12

indicators by 54 percent, on average.[54] Documentation of CSO's rationale for maintaining the targets at their prior levels is important for understanding its analysis and decisions.

CSO officials said that CSO did not document its review of the quality of its performance data and information. According to State's *Program Design and Performance Management Toolkit*, data quality assessments are used to confirm that data meet State's quality standards.[55] These assessments allow bureaus to flag data quality issues and limitations and maintain documentation on such issues, which becomes part of the performance plan.

GAO's *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* calls for agencies to document their processes and analytical decisions.[56] State officials from the Functional Bureau Strategy Support Team said that State does not require bureaus to document the steps used in annual strategic reviews or the annual assessment of targets and data reliability. However, State officials from the Functional Bureau Strategy Support Team said that documenting reviews and key findings are best practices. CSO officials also said they did not document all aspects of the annual review process because of limited resources, including the availability of staff.

Without documentation of its decisions, CSO may not be able to assess the extent to which it is achieving its mission or ensure that it implements decisions from the annual review. Such documentation would allow CSO to better understand its analyses and data quality limitations and to maintain consistency in its annual reviews. It would also help CSO ensure that it acts on the knowledge gained during the performance management process and be better able to communicate this knowledge to external parties.

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[54]For milestones, we assumed that the performance exactly met the target for the calculation. For indicators, we compared the performance to the target.

[55]Department of State, *Program Design and Performance Management Toolkit* (Sept. 2019).

[56]GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, GAO-14-704G (Washington, D.C. Sept. 2014). Principles 3.09, 3.10, Documentation of the Internal Control System.

State, USAID, and DOD Officials We Interviewed Identified Factors That Facilitated or Hindered CSO's Collaboration in Selected Countries

CSO's Relevant Expertise, among Other Factors, Was Cited as Facilitating Effective Collaboration

We interviewed 29 officials from other State bureaus, USAID, and DOD who have collaborated with CSO in selected countries on efforts since 2021 to fulfill its mission to prevent, anticipate, and respond to conflict that undermines U.S. interests.[57] Relevant collaboration experiences discussed by officials include working with CSO stabilization advisors; developing GFA country strategies, programming, and funds; participating in atrocity prevention taskforce efforts responding to country conflicts; and planning stabilization activities.[58]

We asked the 29 officials to describe an experience where collaboration with CSO was effective and to identify factors that facilitated this effective collaboration.[59] Twenty-eight of these officials described effective collaboration experiences with CSO and identified factors, such as CSO's expertise or knowledge, that facilitated the collaboration.[60] Table 5 shows

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[57]We interviewed State and USAID officials on efforts related to Colombia, Ethiopia, and Mozambique. We interviewed DOD officials on efforts related to Mozambique and selected geographic combatant commands.

[58]According to CSO officials, CSO collaboration efforts include (1) implementing whole-of-government efforts including GFA and the Elie Wiesel Act; (2) informing policy by providing data analytics, technical advice, and subject matter expertise on such topics as election violence and armed actors; (3) supporting peace processes and negotiations; (4) deploying stabilization advisors; (5) monitoring, evaluation, and learning, and (6) building and sustaining partnerships for donor coordination.

[59]We asked officials (1) to self-identify factors that facilitated effective collaboration with CSO and (2) whether selected leading collaboration practices facilitated effective collaboration with CSO. For example, we asked officials whether the leading collaboration practices of clarifying roles and responsibilities or including relevant participants facilitated collaboration with CSO.

[60]One official we interviewed did not describe an effective collaboration experience with CSO.

the factors that the officials most frequently identified as facilitating effective collaboration with CSO. At least one official from each agency identified the most frequently identified factors. See appendix III for a list of all factors that officials identified as facilitating effective collaboration with CSO.

Table 5: Factors Most Frequently Identified in 28 Interviews as Facilitating Effective Collaboration with State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO)

Factors	Number of interviews
CSO provided expertise, knowledge, or input to relevant efforts	27
CSO led or integrated itself into relevant efforts	25
CSO's roles and responsibilities were clearly defined and communicated	25
CSO had designated a point of contact for relevant efforts	22
CSO included relevant actors in efforts, such as meetings and/or in preparing outputs such as strategies or interagency government reports.	22
CSO understood larger agency and interagency context	20

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with 29 officials from the Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development, and Department of Defense. | GAO-24-106238

Note: We asked 29 officials to describe an experience when collaborating with CSO was effective and when it could have been improved. Twenty-eight of the 29 officials we interviewed described effective collaboration experiences with CSO. One official we interviewed did not describe an effective collaboration experience with CSO. Regarding the effective collaboration experiences, we asked officials (1) to self-identify factors that facilitated effective collaboration with CSO and (2) whether selected leading collaboration practices facilitated effective collaboration with CSO. For example, we asked officials whether the leading collaboration practices of clarifying roles and responsibilities or including all relevant participants facilitated collaboration with CSO. We categorized and coded factors identified by officials. Some officials identified more than one contributing factor.

The top three factors that officials most frequently identified as facilitating collaboration include CSO's expertise, leadership, and roles and responsibilities.

- **Relevant expertise.** Twenty-seven of the 28 officials we interviewed who had effective collaboration experiences said CSO provided relevant expertise, knowledge, or input that facilitated effective collaboration. For example, one official said, "collaboration with CSO is a success story in my office. If I had to put a temporal frame on the collaboration, in the past 6 months, the relationship with CSO has been awesome … CSO brought a more fully rounded understanding of the execution of the Stability Strategy that we needed at my office. CSO brought the knowledge on stability tasks, which is something we're trying to wrap our heads around—how our office plays into stability activities." In our previous work, we found that including relevant participants, such as those with the appropriate knowledge,

skills, and abilities to contribute to a collaborative effort, is a leading interagency collaboration practice.[61]

- **Engaged leadership.** Twenty-five of the 28 officials we interviewed who had effective collaboration experiences said CSO's leadership or integration into relevant efforts facilitated effective collaboration. For example, one official said, "CSO is good at engaging with interagency officials ... CSO has been helpful in sharing what the U.S. government is doing with others. The effectiveness of the atrocity prevention taskforce would not have happened without CSO."[62] In our previous work, we found that identifying and sustaining leadership, including whether a lead agency or individual has been identified, is a leading collaboration interagency practice.[63]

- **Clear roles and responsibilities.** Twenty-five of the 28 officials we interviewed who had effective collaboration experiences said CSO's clearly defined or communicated roles and responsibilities facilitated effective collaboration. For example, one official said, "coordinating with CSO made my life so much easier because I was able to identify who would be the lead for the Stability Strategy policy initiatives because it wasn't my office. I was able to identify who from my office would be going to CSO for more information and to provide input on behalf of my office." In our previous work, we found that clarification of roles and responsibilities is a leading collaboration practice.[64]

Most officials identified multiple factors that facilitated effective collaboration with CSO when describing their experiences. Specifically, 20 of the 25 officials who said CSO's roles and responsibilities were clearly defined or communicated also said CSO designated a point of contact for relevant efforts and provided relevant knowledge, expertise, or input. One official said a point of contact at CSO, whose roles and responsibilities were clearly defined, provided helpful subject matter expertise on the implementation of peace accords in Colombia. Additionally, 19 of the 27 officials who said CSO provided relevant knowledge, expertise, or input also said CSO led or integrated itself into relevant efforts and understood larger agency and interagency context.

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[61]GAO-23-105520.

[62]As discussed above, CSO is State's lead for atrocity prevention policy and strategies. We previously identified designation of leadership as a mechanism for collaboration. See GAO-23-105520.

[63]GAO-23-105520.

[64]GAO-23-105520.

One official we interviewed said CSO coordinated with relevant State and USAID officials to compile and share updates on an ongoing conflict in northern Ethiopia.[65]

Sixteen of the 28 officials we interviewed who had effective collaboration experiences with CSO described experiences that were related to CSO's stabilization advisors. Fourteen of these officials said CSO's deployed stabilization advisors facilitated effective collaboration because the stabilization advisor (1) provided relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities, or had prior relevant experience; (2) assisted in coordinating efforts; and (3) integrated themselves into larger efforts.[66] See the text box for one official's experience effectively collaborating with a CSO stabilization advisor.

Example of a U.S. Agency Official's Experience Effectively Collaborating with a Stabilization Advisor from State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO)

"The CSO stabilization advisor in country was … the lead on how the mission abroad was having conversations about a conflict in country and sharing information. At State Department offices in Washington, D.C., focus on in-country efforts was very strong, but you also needed someone in the field. It was a perfect assignment for someone whose job was to do interagency coordination … The CSO stabilization advisors were strategic in their thinking. They were organized. They weren't just copying me on every email they send to everyone else all the time. [They] distilled the information. If they sent us something or if it was a report, they would actually say what the report was for and say how we would find it useful, instead of just saying "I saw this 200-page report that was great.""

Source: GAO interview with a U.S. agency official. | GAO-24-106238

Lack of Clarity on CSO's Roles, among Other Factors, Was Cited as Hindering Effective Collaboration with CSO

Twenty-four of the 29 officials from other State bureaus, USAID, and DOD described collaboration experiences with CSO in selected countries

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[65]In this example, the CSO official was part of an interagency group, a mechanism we previously identified as facilitating collaboration. See GAO-23-105520 for more information on mechanisms for interagency collaboration.

[66]As discussed earlier, stabilization advisors are deployed to U.S. embassies and selected DOD combatant commands. The selected DOD combatant commands have Memorandums of Understanding with CSO for the stabilization advisors to help facilitate collaboration. We previously identified Memorandums of Understanding as a mechanism to facilitate collaboration. See GAO-23-105520 for more information on mechanisms for interagency collaboration.

since 2021 that could have been improved.[67] We asked these officials to identify factors that hindered effective collaboration with CSO.[68] Table 6 shows the factors most frequently identified as hindering collaboration by officials. In some cases, the same factors that facilitated collaboration when present would hinder collaboration when absent. For example, nine officials who had an experience where clear roles and responsibilities facilitated collaboration also had another experience where lack of clarity of CSO's roles hindered collaboration. Officials from at least two agencies identified each factor. See appendix III for a list of all factors that officials identified as hindering effective collaboration with CSO.

Table 6: Factors Most Frequently Identified in 24 Interviews as Hindering Effective Collaboration with State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO)

Factors	Number of interviews
CSO's roles and responsibilities were not clearly defined and communicated	13
CSO provided no input when expected	12
CSO did not provide expertise or assistance with funds or programming	9
CSO provided knowledge, expertise, or input that was not helpful or relevant	6
CSO did not integrate itself into larger coordination efforts	5
CSO did not include relevant actors in relevant efforts, such as meetings and/or in preparing outputs such as strategies or interagency government reports	5

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with 29 officials from the Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development, and Department of Defense. | GAO-24-106238

Note: We asked 29 officials to describe an experience when collaborating with CSO was effective and when it could have been improved. Twenty-four of the 29 officials described collaboration experiences with CSO that could have been improved, while five officials did not have a collaboration experience that could have been improved. Regarding these experiences, we asked officials (1) to self-identify factors that hindered effective collaboration with CSO and (2) whether not following selected leading collaboration practices hindered effective collaboration with CSO. For example, we asked officials whether CSO's roles and responsibilities were clearly communicated or defined and whether CSO took steps to include all the relevant participants. We categorized and coded factors identified by officials. Some officials identified more than one contributing factor.

[67]We interviewed State and USAID officials on efforts related to Colombia, Ethiopia, and Mozambique. We interviewed DOD officials on efforts related to Mozambique and selected geographic combatant commands. Five officials we interviewed did not have a collaboration experience with CSO that could have been improved.

[68]We asked officials to self-identify factors that hindered effective collaboration with CSO and whether not following selected leading collaboration practices hindered effective collaboration with CSO. For example, we asked officials whether the roles and responsibilities were clearly communicated or defined and whether CSO took steps to include all the relevant participants.

The top three factors that officials identified as hindering effective collaboration cover clarity on CSO's roles and responsibilities and lack of input and assistance from CSO.

- **Insufficient clarity on roles.** Thirteen of the 24 officials we interviewed who had collaboration experiences that could have been improved said CSO's roles and responsibilities were not clearly defined or communicated. Officials discussed collaboration experiences where CSO's role leading meetings or interagency efforts was unclear, among others. For example, one official said, "I think that clearly communicated and defined roles and responsibilities is something that CSO sometimes struggles with. I don't have a strong grasp of … CSO's roles and responsibilities and where those roles end. That is something I'm a bit confused on when working with them." This official was describing an experience where CSO was assisting planning on an interagency strategy. In our previous work, we found that clarifying roles and responsibilities is a leading interagency collaboration practice.[69]

- **Insufficient input.** Twelve of the 24 officials we interviewed who had collaboration experiences that could have been improved said CSO did not provide input when expected. Officials discussed collaboration experiences where CSO did not provide technical expertise such as data analytics, or scenario planning or share subject matter expertise to inform future efforts, among others. For example, one official said, "a big focus for my office right now is security sector stabilization efforts. I am not an expert on these efforts. Initially, I was trying to see if I could talk to somebody who had more experience on these efforts. It turns out a CSO official who had supported our office before was an expert. I asked this official if we could sit down and they could walk me through it a little bit, so I could get some understanding of security sector stabilization efforts given it's a new focus. I said that I would love to meet, and asked if I should talk to others or if I could talk with this official. Unfortunately, that never happened. There was no follow-up. I was hoping to rely on that person's experience and knowledge, but we weren't able to chat. CSO never responded or set up the meeting."

- **Limited knowledge of funds and programming.** Nine of the 24 officials we interviewed who had collaboration experiences that could have been improved said CSO did not provide expertise on, or assistance with, funds or programming. Officials discussed

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[69]GAO-23-105520.

experiences where proposed programs were not funded because CSO did not provide appropriate knowledge or expertise on funds available for State programs, among others. For example, one official said, "my office manages an account where the funds can only be used for the military. And so, when you have somebody from CSO [requesting] funds from this account to support non-governmental organizations, that's just funny. Had the CSO official had knowledge of funding, they would have never [requested the funding]. I think CSO should be a little bit better prepared and know the funding available to State and what they can use for their programming." In our previous work, we found that leveraging resources, such as funding, is a leading interagency collaboration practice.[70]

Several officials described multiple factors that hindered effective collaboration with CSO. For example, 13 officials said CSO's roles and responsibilities were not clearly defined or communicated. Of those 13 officials, 10 said CSO provided no input when expected and seven said CSO did not provide expertise or assistance with funds, foreign assistance, or programming. One official was unclear on CSO's role leading the Stability Strategy's implementation because CSO did not communicate relevant updates. Another official described an experience where a CSO official helped identify potential programs to conduct in response to an ongoing conflict. However, CSO did not provide the support the official expected on program design, and therefore, the program's implementation was delayed.

Twelve of the 24 officials we interviewed who had collaboration experiences that could have been more effective described experiences related to programming. Seven of the 12 officials said CSO did not provide helpful, appropriate, or relevant programming input. See the text box for one official's description of an experience collaborating with CSO on programming.

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[70]GAO-23-105520.

Example of a U.S. Agency Official's Experience Collaborating with the Department of State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) on Programming

"CSO was trying to do programming related to security sector stabilization which was not that useful because of the status of the in-country conflict at that time. The CSO official wanting to do this programming had a lot of experience in security sector stabilization so perhaps that was why CSO wanted to push this type of programming. The programming they were pushing seemed like a mismatch given the country situation at the time."

Source: GAO interview with a U.S. agency official. | GAO-24-106238

CSO Requests and Collects Feedback to Improve Its Collaboration Efforts

CSO officials said they seek feedback to understand factors that facilitate or hinder collaboration. For example, CSO collects feedback on whether its efforts are appropriate to achieving the mission, results are adequate, and change is needed. CSO officials also said they use this feedback to change existing efforts or inform future efforts.

The majority of the officials we interviewed who provided feedback to CSO said CSO was generally responsive to their feedback on collaborating with CSO on efforts related to conflict prevention and stabilization. Fifteen of the 27 officials we interviewed told us they had provided feedback to CSO on its collaboration efforts.[71] Of these 15 officials, 12 said CSO was generally responsive to their feedback.[72] One official recounted providing feedback when CSO did not allow sufficient time for the official's office to review and comment on an atrocity prevention report. The following year, CSO adjusted the review process so that the official's office had sufficient time to review and provide comments that CSO incorporated into the report.

CSO officials also said they consistently request and collect feedback on their efforts. CSO has collected feedback from U.S. officials on efforts

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[71]We did not ask two of the 29 officials we interviewed about providing feedback to CSO because they did not describe an experience that could have been improved. Eight officials did not provide feedback for various reasons. For example, two officials said they did not provide feedback because they had limited experience collaborating with CSO. The remaining four officials may have provided feedback. Two were unsure whether they had provided feedback. One official may have provided feedback prior to the scope of our review. The other official said CSO was aware of their feedback because concerns about the short-term deployments of stabilization advisors were already a known challenge.

[72]Of the remaining three officials, one said CSO did not act on their feedback and two said they were unsure of whether CSO acted on their feedback or did not specify whether CSO acted on their feedback.

including analysis, deployments, programming, and planning and technical support.

- **Analysis.** CSO officials contact recipients of CSO's data analytic products to understand their perspectives on the products' use and impact. For example, State officials who reviewed a CSO analysis of the security at a refugee camp requested follow-on briefings because this analysis was the only data-driven product on the issue, according to CSO officials. CSO also uses project management software to track status and document the impact of its data analytic products.

- **Deployments.** CSO officials request and collect feedback on stabilization advisors through annual employee performance evaluations. For example, CSO requested feedback from U.S. embassy officials on support from a CSO stabilization advisor. In another example, an official from another agency told us they provided feedback on CSO's stabilization advisor as part of the advisor's annual performance evaluation.

- **Programming.** CSO conducts evaluations of its programs to examine their performance and outcomes. For example, CSO evaluated a program conducted with an implementing partner to provide research to inform policies on countering violent extremism. The evaluation included lessons learned and recommendations for future programming. For example, the evaluation recommended considerations CSO program officers and management should take when looking for and selecting implementing partners for their programs.

- **Planning and technical support.** To collect feedback on planning and technical support, CSO officials said they maintain open communication with officials at embassies and regional bureaus through emails, phone calls, and in-country visits. Some partners have provided CSO with impact statements and success stories, according to CSO. CSO has also requested feedback through surveys after efforts including tabletop exercises and negotiation support. For example, CSO sent a survey to State officials who participated in a negotiation simulation exercise that explored strategies for enhancing the involvement of women in peace processes and political negotiations. The survey was designed to collect information from participants on how to modify the simulation for future iterations.

Conclusions

As conflict, instability, and violence continue to pose threats around the world, CSO's mission is increasingly important. Effectively measuring CSO's performance is critical for understanding the extent to which it is achieving its mission. However, CSO officials said they have had difficulties measuring the effectiveness of their efforts, given the precarious nature of conflict and stabilization. CSO has followed some, but not all, key performance management steps and practices that could help it to assess its overall performance. While CSO has established goals, it has not set targets for about 30 percent of its performance indicators or clearly documented its reviews of the targets used to measure its progress. In particular, CSO has not documented why it did not increase targets that it significantly exceeded. Without addressing the key steps to assess progress, CSO may have difficulty demonstrating that it is achieving its mission to prevent conflict and stabilize post-conflict countries. Following all the steps would better position CSO to measure progress toward meeting its mission.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following two recommendations to the Secretary of State:

The Secretary of State should ensure that the Assistant Secretary for CSO requires a target for each of the bureau's performance indicators. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of State should ensure that the Assistant Secretary for CSO fully documents CSO's performance management process, such as steps used in the annual strategic review, including the annual assessments of targets and data reliability. (Recommendation 2)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to State, USAID, and DOD for review and comment. State, and USAID provided written comments that are reprinted in appendixes IV, and V, respectively, and summarized below. State and DOD provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

In State's comments, reproduced in appendix IV, CSO partially agreed with recommendation 1 and agreed with recommendation 2.

CSO partially agreed with recommendation 1, which was to require a target for each of the bureau's performance indicators. CSO agreed to set targets for each of its performance indicators when possible but said that setting targets for performance indicators with outcomes that are not fully attributable to CSO activities may not be possible. CSO also noted that in some cases setting targets is not helpful because resources and priorities

may evolve during a bureau strategy's 4-year outlook. In addition, CSO stated that while we used GAO best practices (i.e., GAO's key steps and practices) for performance management for our assessment, State's policies and toolkits for strategic planning, design, monitoring, and evaluation primarily guide CSO's work.

We maintain that CSO should set targets for all its indicators that measure performance. While an outcome may not be fully attributable to CSO's activities, we maintain that CSO should still set targets to measure its contribution to the outcome. In addition, while CSO said evolving resources and priorities may affect the relevance of targets, CSO can update targets as needed, including during its annual strategic review. As noted in the report, State's Functional Bureau Strategy Support Team said an indicator without a target limits a bureau's ability to assess progress. Moreover, in our assessment, State's best practices for performance management are generally consistent with GAO's key steps and practices for performance management and should not limit CSO from setting targets for its performance indicators. Setting, reviewing, and revising targets, including targets that maintain a level from a prior fiscal year, can help CSO direct its resources in a changing environment.

CSO agreed with recommendation 2, which was to fully document its performance management process, such as steps used in the annual strategic review, including the annual assessments of targets and data reliability. CSO said it will complete the recommended action. CSO also noted that it had provided us with documentation of its performance management process. While CSO provided some documentation of its performance management process, we found it did not fully document all steps in its process. Specifically, CSO did not document its review of targets or the quality of its performance data and information. We described the documented aspects of CSO's performance management process where possible. For example, we noted that CSO documented agendas, discussion questions, and certain outcomes of its annual strategic review. Fully documenting all aspects of CSO's performance management process would address this recommendation.

In USAID's comments, reproduced in appendix V, USAID said it is committed to working with CSO on multiple interagency efforts including the GFA and the Elie Wiesel Act.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of State, the Administrator of USAID, the Secretary of Defense, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at https://www.gao.gov.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-7279 or elhodirin@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix VI.

Nagla'a El-Hodiri
Director, International Affairs and Trade

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report (1) examines how, if at all, the Department of State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations' (CSO) roles, efforts, and resources have changed since fiscal year (FY) 2016; (2) assesses the extent to which CSO followed key practices to assess and improve its performance management; and (3) examines relevant U.S. agencies' perspectives on collaboration with CSO since 2021 in selected countries.

To examine how, if at all, CSO's roles, efforts, and resources have changed since FY 2016—building on State's Inspector General's 2015 follow-up report[1]—we interviewed officials from each CSO office and reviewed documents such as the following:

- Relevant laws, policies, and strategies related to conflict prevention and stabilization, including the 2018 *Stabilization Assistance Review* and the Global Fragility Act of 2019.[2]

- State's Congressional Budget Justifications.

- State's *Foreign Affairs Manual*.

- CSO's Functional Bureau Strategies (bureau strategy), which are 4-year plans that outline the bureau's priorities. Specifically, we analyzed CSO's five bureau strategies since FY 2016 to identify how, if at all, its roles and efforts had changed.[3] For example, we compared how CSO described its mission, efforts, and focus areas in each of its bureau strategies.

- CSO's one-pagers on its mission, lines of effort, and other topics.

To describe CSO's programs, we analyzed data on CSO's ongoing programs. CSO provided a spreadsheet recording the program name,

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[1]In 2014, State's Inspector General reported weaknesses in its inspection of CSO and made 43 recommendations. See Department of State Office of Inspector General, *Inspection of the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations*, ISP-I-14-06 (Arlington, VA: March 2014). In 2015, State's Inspector General reported that CSO had not resolved fundamental issues related to its mission, organizational structure, and staffing after conducting its follow-up review. See Department of State Office of Inspector General, *Compliance Follow-Up Review of the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations*, ISP-C-15-13 (Arlington, VA: February 2015).

[2]Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development, and Department of Defense, *Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas* (2018). Pub. L. No. 116-94, Div. J, Title V, 133 Stat. 2534, 3060 (Dec. 20, 2019).

[3]CSO has updated its bureau strategy four times since FY 2016, the period covered by our review.

amount of obligated funds, location, start date, and end date, among other data elements, for its ongoing programs as of November 2023. We calculated (1) the total number of CSO's ongoing programs and (2) the amount of obligated funds for the programs, both overall and by location. To determine the reliability of the data provided on CSO's ongoing programs, we interviewed CSO officials about the data, reviewed documentation related to the data, and conducted testing for missing data, outliers, and other signs of erroneous information. For example, we identified an instance where a single program name was associated with two locations and confirmed that the entry represented two distinct programs with CSO officials. We found the data on CSO's ongoing programs as of November 2023 were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this reporting objective.

To describe CSO's resources, we analyzed State data on CSO's funds and staff from FYs 2016 through 2023.

Funds. To determine the amount of funds CSO annually received, we analyzed data on the funds CSO received for its (1) operations and (2) foreign assistance programming and related activities, respectively.[4] CSO provided data recording the FY, amount, and funding account, among other data elements, for the funds it received from FYs 2016 through 2023.[5] CSO recorded certain funds it received for foreign assistance programming as "reallocated," which means that another State entity or agency provided those funds to CSO to implement specific programs, according to CSO officials.[6] We calculated the funds CSO annually received for its operations and foreign assistance programming, respectively, from FYs 2016 through 2023. We also identified the highest and lowest amount of funds CSO received during this period. Further, we identified the proportion of funds CSO annually received from another State entity or agency for its foreign assistance programming.

To determine the reliability of the data provided on CSO's funds, we interviewed CSO officials about the data and officials from State's

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[4]CSO funds are those allocated to CSO, as well as those that CSO officials said were originally allocated to another State entity or agency and then provided to CSO to implement specific programs.

[5]CSO provided the data according to the FY in which the bureau received the funds. For the data on funds for foreign assistance programming, CSO also included the FY of the funding source.

[6]For foreign assistance programming funds marked as "reallocated," CSO specified the prior entity and funding account associated with the funds.

Bureaus of the Comptroller and Global Financial Services and Budget and Planning about the underlying data systems. We also reviewed documentation about the data and conducted testing for missing data, outliers, and other signs of erroneous information. For example, we followed up with CSO officials about the greatest increase in funds for foreign assistance programming, from $8.7 million in FY 2021 to $52.9 million in FY 2022. CSO officials said they received funds from other State entities in FY 2022 to help implement the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability and specific programs in Ukraine and Sudan.

For funds for foreign assistance programming, we traced certain data representing 72 percent of the total to source documents. Specifically, we verified the (1) FY of the funds, (2) amount, and (3) funding account for foreign assistance programming funds CSO recorded as having been provided by another State entity or agency with supporting documents CSO provided, such as congressional notifications. We identified two instances where the FY in which CSO received the funds occurred before the congressional notification and followed up with CSO officials to correct the data.

We found the data provided on the funds CSO received for its (1) operations and (2) foreign assistance programming and related activities from FYs 2016 through 2023 were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this reporting objective.

Staff. To determine CSO's annual staff positions, we analyzed data on the authorized full-time equivalent (FTE) positions CSO received and filled. State's Bureau of Global Talent Management (GTM) provided summary reports for CSO from FYs 2016 through 2023. These reports record the number of authorized and filled FTE positions by (1) Civil Service, (2) Foreign Service-domestic, and (3) Foreign Service-overseas as of the end of the FY (i.e., September 30 for each FY). We calculated the total number of authorized positions CSO received and filled for each year. We also identified the highest and lowest number of authorized positions CSO received during this period. Further, we compared the number of authorized positions CSO received to those it filled for each year.

To determine the reliability of the data provided on CSO's authorized and filled FTE positions, we interviewed GTM and CSO officials and reviewed relevant documents, such as GTM authorization notices and monthly reports. We also tested for missing data, outliers, and other signs of

erroneous information. For example, we asked GTM and CSO officials about the greatest decrease in authorized positions, from 100 in FY 2017 to 81 in FY 2018. GTM officials said that following the end of the hiring freeze in May 2018, they set the number of authorized positions for all State bureaus for FY 2018 to December 2017 employment levels, which decreased CSO's authorized positions.[7]

We found the data provided on CSO's authorized and filled FTE positions from FYs 2016 through 2023 were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this reporting objective.

To assess the extent to which CSO followed key practices to assess and improve its performance management, we compared CSO's performance management processes from 2021 through 2023 to key performance management steps and related practices. We focused on this period because CSO revised its bureau strategy and indicators during its first annual strategic review in 2021, according to CSO officials. Specifically, we used all three steps and associated practices from GAO-23-105289 and supplemented them with the practice on involving stakeholders in defining missions and desired outcomes from GGD-96-118 because CSO works with a wide range of partners.[8]

We assessed a step as "met" when CSO's processes fully addressed each of the underlying practices; "partially met" when CSO's processes met some, but not all, of the underlying practices; and "not met" when CSO's processes did not meet any of the underlying practices.

We assessed a practice as "met" when CSO's processes addressed the practice, "partially met" when CSO's processes partially (but not completely) addressed the practice, and "not met" when CSO's processes did not address any of the practice.

We reviewed documents such as the following:

• State's *Foreign Affairs Manual*;

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[7]GTM officials said State instituted a hiring freeze in FY 2017 as directed by the President.

[8]GAO, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts*, GAO-23-105460 (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2023); GAO, *Coast Guard: Additional Actions Needed to Improve Commercial Fishing Vessel Safety Efforts*, GAO-23-105289 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 2, 2022); and GAO, *Executive Guide: Effectively Implementing the Government Performance and Results Act*, GGD-96-118 (Washington, D.C.: June 1996).

- CSO's 2022 bureau strategy;

- State's *Program Design and Performance Management Toolkit*; and

- CSO's documentation of its performance management, including for its annual strategic reviews.

We interviewed CSO officials about the bureau's performance management processes. We also interviewed knowledgeable members from State's Functional Bureau Strategy Support Team, Office of Foreign Assistance, and Bureau of Budget and Planning, to understand State's requirements and best practices for performance management.

To examine relevant U.S. agencies' perspectives on collaboration with CSO since 2021, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 29 agency officials from other State bureaus, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and Department of Defense (DOD). These are the primary agencies implementing the U.S. government's conflict prevention and stabilization efforts. We interviewed these officials to learn about their experiences collaborating with CSO. We focused on CSO's efforts since 2021, so officials could discuss relatively recent experiences collaborating with CSO.

Country selection. We first identified three countries to select a judgmental sample of officials who have collaborated with CSO since 2021. We identified a list of countries where CSO had ongoing efforts from 2021 to 2023. We identified these countries on the basis of criteria including (a) where CSO had provided technical assistance through efforts such as analysis and tabletop exercises, (b) where CSO had programs receiving foreign assistance, (c) which countries were identified as priority countries for interagency efforts such as the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability, and (d) where CSO had deployed officials as stabilization advisors on temporary duty assignments. We identified which countries also had programming from USAID's Bureau of Conflict Prevention and Stabilization. After reviewing the criteria, we selected Colombia, Ethiopia, and Mozambique from this list of countries. These three countries represented a range of CSO efforts, such as analysis, deployments, and programming, that could provide us with an overview of CSO's collaboration efforts in Washington, D.C.; U.S. embassies; and USAID missions across different types of CSO efforts. These countries also represented different geographic areas and types of conflict and stability contexts.

Official selection. We interviewed a non-generalizable sample of 29 agency officials who had collaborated with CSO on efforts related to Colombia, Ethiopia, and Mozambique since 2021. To identify officials for our interviews, we began by asking State, USAID, and DOD for an initial list of officials who had collaborated with CSO on efforts related to these countries since 2021. We then collected information about each of the officials on our list, such as their name, contact information, office, and title, and the mode and frequency of their collaboration with CSO. We collected this information by asking the officials a standard set of questions in writing via email and over the phone. We also asked each official to identify other officials who had also collaborated with CSO on efforts related to Colombia, Ethiopia, and Mozambique since 2021 and added these agency officials to our list. From the list, we selected a non-generalizable sample of officials from other State bureaus, USAID, and DOD to interview. We selected 12 officials from other State bureaus, 12 from USAID, and five from DoD. We interviewed all 29 officials we selected.

We used the following criteria to select officials across a range of geographic locations, offices, and collaboration experiences:

- **Official's location.** To ensure we included perspectives of CSO's collaboration efforts with State and USAID officials working in Washington, D.C., and at U.S. embassies and USAID missions, we selected at least one State official who was based at State and one USAID official from their headquarters in Washington, D.C.; at least one State official located at U.S. embassies in Colombia, Ethiopia, and Mozambique; and at least one USAID official located at USAID missions in Ethiopia and Mozambique.[9] We selected DOD officials who had ongoing collaboration with CSO since 2021 and were from Washington, D.C.; the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy; and the geographic combatant commands.[10]

- **Duration of collaboration with CSO.** To ensure we included perspectives of collaboration with CSO over varying lengths of time, we selected officials who had ongoing collaboration with CSO since 2021 that was either less or more than weekly, as well as officials who

[9]USAID officials at the USAID Mission in Colombia said they had not collaborated with CSO since 2021.

[10]We spoke with DOD officials at the geographic combatant commands where CSO had long-term stabilization advisors: U.S. Africa Command; U.S. Central Command, which covers the Middle East; U.S. European Command; and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.

may have had ongoing collaboration for a shorter period for a specific
effort or project, such as election monitoring.

- **Office and position representation:** To ensure we included
  perspectives of collaboration with CSO from different offices, we did
  not select multiple officials from the same office who worked on efforts
  in the same country.[11] We may have selected officials from the same
  office who worked on efforts in different countries because they
  collaborated with CSO on different country efforts.

Interviews with selected officials. We conducted semi-structured
interviews with the non-generalizable sample of 29 agency officials we
selected. We developed and used an interview guide with a standard set
of questions to ask officials about their experiences with and perspectives
on collaborating with CSO. We conducted two pretests with selected
officials and made refinements to our interview guide before finalizing it.
We conducted our interviews virtually using video-conferencing software.

During our interviews, we asked agency officials to describe their
collaboration experience with CSO overall. We then asked them to
specifically describe an experience where collaboration was effective and
an experience where collaboration could be improved. For each
experience, we asked officials about (1) what they were working on and
what they were trying to accomplish, (2) which agencies and offices were
involved, and (3) their roles and responsibilities, as well as CSO's. We
asked officials to explain why experiences were effective or could have
been improved, including factors that facilitated or hindered collaboration.
We also asked whether selected leading collaboration practices identified
in our prior work facilitated or hindered collaboration.[12] For experiences
where collaboration was effective, we also asked officials what value

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[11]We previously identified offices from other State bureaus, USAID, and DOD that
collaborate with CSO on the basis of our review of CSO documentation, including CSO's
bureau strategies and Congressional Budget Justifications, and our interviews with CSO
officials. CSO confirmed the list of offices. CSO also provided information on how often it
collaborates with these offices and for which efforts, such as providing support for
negotiations or peace processes.

[12]We specifically asked agency officials whether the following leading collaboration
practices were aligned with factors that facilitated or hindered effective collaboration with
CSO: define common outcomes, ensure accountability, clarify roles and responsibilities,
and include relevant participants. We determined these practices were the most relevant
to CSO's collaboration efforts on the basis of issues raised in our previous interviews with
agency officials on CSO's collaboration. For more information on these and other leading
collaboration practices, see GAO, *Government Performance Management: Leading
Practices to Enhance Interagency Collaboration and Address Crosscutting Challenges*,
GAO-23-105520 (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2023).

CSO added to their work. Specifically, we asked what knowledge, skills, and abilities CSO contributed to the experience (e.g., subject matter expertise); whether CSO provided the appropriate knowledge, skills, and abilities; and how efficiently and effectively CSO provided services or products when working with them.

We also asked whether officials provided feedback on CSO's collaboration efforts and whether CSO acted on this feedback, such as making course corrections as needed. We also asked officials about ways CSO could improve as a collaboration partner with regard to executing its mission. Multiple analysts took detailed notes that captured the views of agency officials in their own words.

Content analysis. To identify factors facilitating or hindering collaboration, we conducted a content analysis of notes from our interviews. To do so, we took the following steps:

- Multiple analysts independently reviewed notes and then worked together to create an initial list of categories to use as a classification scheme.

- We then iteratively tested and refined our classification scheme. To do so, two of the five analysts conducted a pretest by independently reviewing a total of five interviews using the scheme. The two analysts compared their coding to identify differences and met to discuss disagreements and adjust the classification scheme as needed. Once the analysts determined the coding was sufficiently reliable, we finalized our classification scheme and documented it in a codebook. For the final analysis, one analyst used the codebook to code the 29 interviews. The second analyst reviewed the first analyst's coding to determine whether she agreed or disagreed with the codes. The two analysts met to reconcile any differences in the final coding.

- After completing the coding, we tallied the results to summarize factors by agency. We also analyzed factors by specific CSO efforts such as programming and deployment of stabilization advisors. In addition, we compared factors identified by officials with selected leading collaboration practices and analyzed groupings of factors to determine which factors, if any, were identified as facilitating or hindering collaboration. Our findings are not generalizable.

In this report, we used indefinite quantifiers (e.g., "nearly all") to characterize the views of the 29 officials we interviewed, defining them to quantify officials' views as follows:

- "nearly all" = 24 to 28 officials

- "most" = 18 to 23 officials

- "many" = 12 to 17 officials

- "several" = 5 to 11 officials

- "some" = 2 to 4 officials

We conducted this performance audit from September 2022 to June 2024 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.

Appendix II: Department of State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations' Organizational Structure

Figure 8 shows the Department of State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations' organizational structure and the number of staff in each of its offices, as of November 2023.

Figure 8: State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations' (CSO) Organizational Chart, as of November 2023
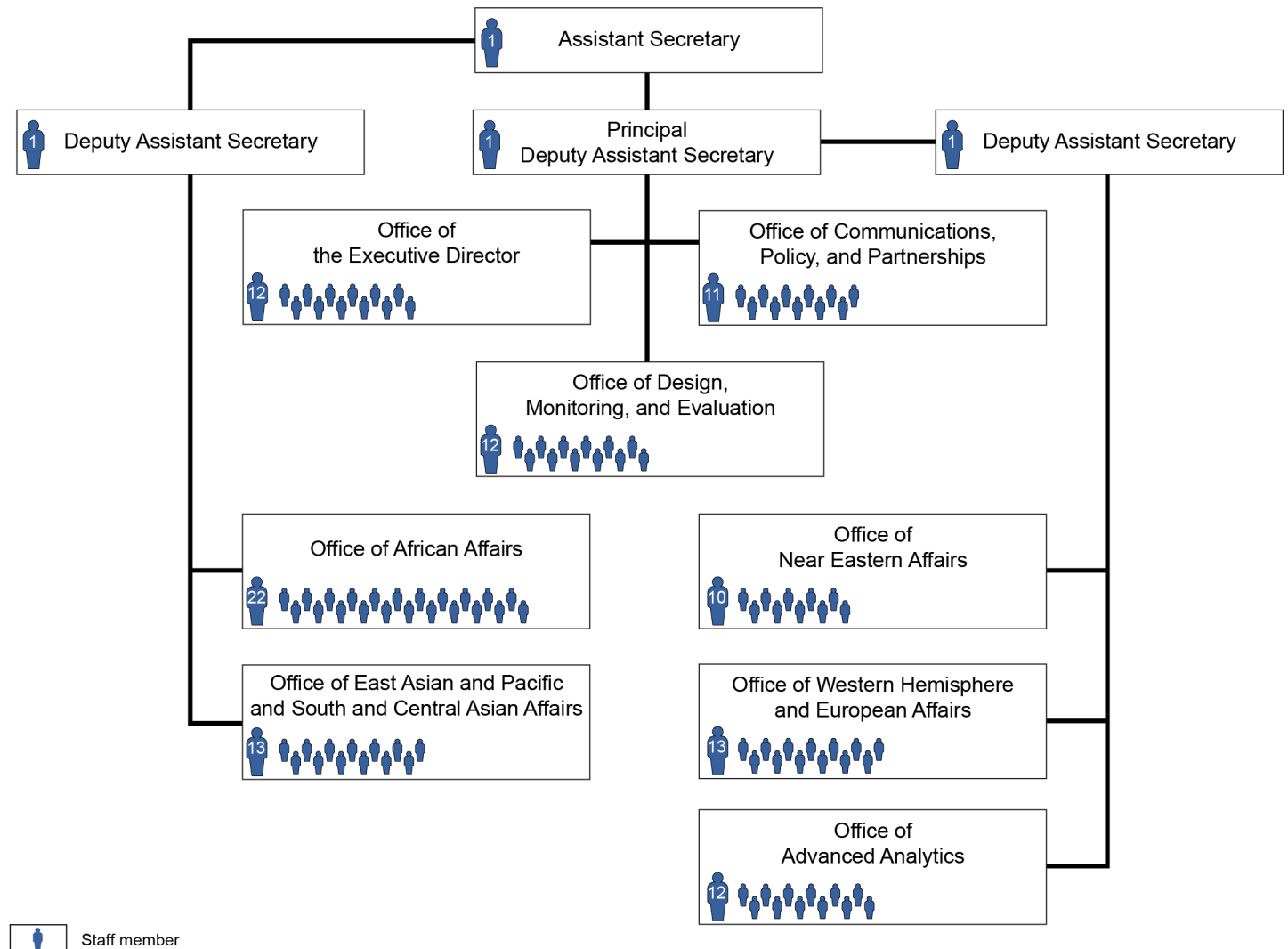
Sources: Department of State, 1 *Foreign Affairs Manual* Exhibit 471.2 and data (as of November 2023); GAO (icons). | GAO-24-106238

Note: The number of staff for each office represents filled positions. This chart does not depict CSO's Front Office, which includes the Assistant Secretary, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, and Deputy Assistant Secretaries, and had five filled positions as of November 2023, according to CSO officials.

Appendix III: U.S. Agency Perspectives on the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations' Collaboration Efforts

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 29 agency officials from Department of State bureaus other than the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and Department of Defense (DOD) to learn about their experiences collaborating with CSO for selected countries. We asked them to describe an experience where collaboration was effective and an experience where collaboration could be improved. Of the 29 officials, 28 discussed effective collaboration experiences and 24 discussed experiences that could have been improved.[1] For each experience, we asked officials about (1) what they were working on and what they were trying to accomplish, (2) which agencies and offices were involved, and (3) their roles and responsibilities, as well as CSO's. We asked officials to explain why the experiences were effective or could have been improved, including factors that facilitated or hindered collaboration. We also asked whether following selected leading collaboration practices was relevant to the factors officials identified as facilitating collaboration and whether not following them hindered collaboration.[2] We asked officials about ways CSO could improve as a collaboration partner as it relates to executing its mission.

Table 7 lists factors officials identified as facilitating collaboration with CSO.

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[1]One official we interviewed did not describe an effective collaboration experience with CSO. Five officials we interviewed did not describe a collaboration experience with CSO that could have been improved.

[2]We specifically asked agency officials whether the following leading collaboration practices aligned with the factors that facilitated or hindered effective collaboration with CSO: define common outcomes, ensure accountability, clarify roles and responsibilities, and include relevant participants. We determined these practices were the most relevant to CSO's collaboration efforts on the basis of issues raised in our previous interviews with agency officials about CSO's collaboration. For more information on these and other leading collaboration practices, see GAO, *Government Performance Management: Leading Practices to Enhance Interagency Collaboration and Address Crosscutting Challenges*, GAO-23-105520 (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2023).

**Appendix III: U.S. Agency Perspectives on the
Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization
Operations' Collaboration Efforts**

Table 7: Factors Identified in 28 Interviews as Facilitating Effective Collaboration with State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO)

Factors	Number of interviews
CSO provided expertise, knowledge, and/or input to relevant efforts	27
CSO led or integrated itself into relevant efforts	25
CSO's roles and responsibilities were clearly defined and communicated	25
CSO had designated a point of contact for relevant efforts	22
CSO included relevant actors in efforts, such as meetings and/or in preparing outputs such as strategies or interagency government reports.	22
CSO understood larger agency and interagency context	20
CSO had the ability to provide a person to take responsibility for issues in an office, embassy, or working group	17
CSO's roles and responsibilities were mandated or supported by senior officials or interagency bodies	11
CSO's research, analysis and/or data analytics were useful	11
CSO clearly represents positions of State and/or interagency and/or USG as needed	7
CSO provided expertise or assistance with funds or programming.	4
CSO's products or services were helpful because interviewee knew what to ask for	3

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with 29 officials from the Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development, and Department of Defense. | GAO-24-106238

Note: We asked 29 officials to describe an experience when collaborating with CSO was effective and when it could have been improved. Of those 29 officials, 28 described an experience that was effective. One official we interviewed did not describe an effective collaboration experience with CSO. Regarding the effective collaboration experiences, we asked officials (1) to self-identify factors that facilitated effective collaboration with CSO and (2) whether selected leading collaboration practices facilitated effective collaboration with CSO. For example, we asked officials whether the leading collaboration practices of clarifying roles and responsibilities or including relevant participants facilitated collaboration with CSO. We categorized and coded factors identified by officials. Some officials identified more than one contributing factor.

**Appendix III: U.S. Agency Perspectives on the
Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization
Operations' Collaboration Efforts**

Table 8 lists factors officials identified as hindering collaboration with CSO.

Table 8: Factors Identified in 24 Interviews as Hindering Effective Collaboration with State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO)

Factors	Number of interviews
CSO's roles and responsibilities were not clearly defined and communicated	13
CSO provided no input when expected	12
CSO did not provide expertise or assistance with funds or programming	9
CSO provided knowledge, expertise, or input that was not helpful or relevant	6
CSO did not integrate itself into larger coordination efforts	5
CSO did not include relevant actors in relevant efforts, such as meetings and/or in preparing outputs such as strategies or interagency government reports.	5
CSO did not understand larger agency and interagency context	4
CSO's limited influence at State	3
CSO's research, analysis, and/or data analytics were not useful	3
CSO did not provide, communicate, or share updates on available data analytics, services, and/or products	2
CSO's roles and responsibilities were not mandated or supported by senior officials or interagency bodies	2
CSO did not have a clear point of contact	1
Other factors[a]	6

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with 29 officials from the Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development, and Department of Defense. | GAO-24-106238

Note: We asked 29 officials to describe an experience when collaborating with CSO was effective and when it could have been improved. Of those 29 officials, 24 described an experience that could have been improved, while five officials did not have a collaboration experience that could have been improved. Regarding these experiences, we asked officials (1) to self-identify factors that hindered effective collaboration with CSO and (2) whether not following selected leading collaboration practices hindered effective collaboration with CSO. For example, we asked officials whether CSO's roles and responsibilities were clearly communicated or defined and whether CSO took steps to include all the relevant participants. We categorized and coded factors identified by officials. Some officials identified more than one contributing factor.

[a]Other factors we did not categorize above include CSO's internal coordination and lack of available resources to collaborate effectively.

**Appendix III: U.S. Agency Perspectives on the
Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization
Operations' Collaboration Efforts**

Table 9 lists suggestions from officials on how CSO could improve as a collaboration partner in regard to executing its mission.

Table 9: Suggestions from Officials on How State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) Could Improve as a Collaboration Partner

Factors	Number of interviewees
CSO should improve coordination related skills	13
CSO should clarify and/or communicate its roles and responsibilities	10
CSO should continue to expand and/or improve products, services, and resources	9
Other suggestions[a]	3

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with 29 officials from the Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development, and Department of Defense. | GAO-24-106238

Note: We asked 29 officials to identify ways CSO could improve as a collaboration partner. After we reviewed these suggestions, we developed a classification scheme to categorize improvements identified by officials into three improvements listed in table 10. Some officials offered more than one suggestion.

[a]We received other suggestions we did not categorize above, including a suggestion that CSO should better understand interagency contexts.

Appendix IV: Comments from the Department of State

United States Department of State

Comptroller

Washington, DC 20520

May 17, 2024

Jason Bair
Managing Director
International Affairs and Trade
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

Dear Mr. Bair:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "STATE DEPARTMENT: State Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations Should Better Track Its Performance." GAO Job Code 106238.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

Sincerely,

James A. Walsh

Enclosure:
    As stated

cc: GAO – Nagla'a El-Hodiri
       OIG - Norman Brown

Department of State Comments on GAO Draft Report

<u>STATE DEPARTMENT: State Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations
Should Better Track Its Performance</u>
(GAO-24-106238SU, GAO Code GAO106238)

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the GAO draft report *"Bureau
of Conflict and Stabilization Operations Should Better Track Its Performance"*.
The Department of State appreciates the work the GAO has completed to
review the status of operations in the Bureau of Conflict Stabilization
Operations.

**Recommendation 1: The Secretary of State should ensure that the
Assistant Secretary for CSO requires a target for each of the bureau's
performance indicators.**

Department Response: The Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations
partially agrees with this recommendation from GAO. The Bureau of Conflict
and Stabilization Operations will develop targets for each of its performance
indicators, where possible, noting that CSO and Department performance
management best practices hold that targets may not be appropriate for
context indicators or indicators that measure outcomes that are not fully
attributable to CSO activities. While GAO conducted the audit using a set of
best practices regarding performance management (GAO-23 -105289), the
Department of State's policies and toolkits for strategic planning, design,
monitoring, and evaluation serves as the primary guide for CSO's work.

The Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations agrees that targets are
useful and notes that it set targets for the majority of its performance
indicators. However, CSO believes that in some cases setting a target may
not be helpful. CSO is often more concerned with the content of a data
point than with the quantity of data points. Setting a target in a four-year
document in an environment with evolving resources and priorities can
sometimes be more restrictive than useful. CSO has documentation of prior
fiscal year data for its FBS, which it refers to when relevant for each FBS

strategic review; sometimes CSO's target is maintaining a level from the prior fiscal year.

Recommendation 2: The Secretary of State should ensure that the Assistant Secretary for CSO fully documents CSO's performance management process, such as steps used in the annual review, including the annual assessments of targets and data reliability.

Department Response: The Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations agrees with this recommendation from GAO. CSO will complete the recommended actions, but the bureau continues to assert that this recommendation does not account for the documentation that CSO has done with regards to the FBS in the past several years, as well as the documentation that CSO has provided GAO.

CSO provided GAO with examples that demonstrate its documentation of CSO's performance management process. These include copies of CSO's strategic review presentation and corresponding strategic review readout document, containing conclusions, recommendations, and clearances by office leadership. The strategic review readout document in particular captures conclusions about the relevance of each sub-objective and corresponding performance indicators and milestones. CSO provided GAO with the FBS data collection instructions, which were distributed to the bureau, and e-mails capturing instructions regarding strategic reviews. CSO maintains a repository of FBS documents spanning several fiscal years on its SharePoint site, which it refers to each year.

Appendix V: Comments from the U.S. Agency for International Development

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

May 20, 2024

Ms. Nagla'a El-Hodiri
Acting Director, International Affairs and Trade
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20226

Re: Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations Should Better Track Its Performance
        (GAO- 24-106238SU)

Dear Ms. El-Hodiri:

        I am pleased to provide the formal response of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to the draft report produced by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) titled, Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) Should Better Track Its Performance (GAO- 24-106238SU). The report does not contain any recommendations for action on behalf of the Agency.

        USAID appreciates the opportunity to participate in this study and is committed to working with State Department partners including the CSO. USAID works with CSO on multiple interagency efforts to ensure a whole-of-goverment approach to implement key legislative initiatives including the Global Fragility Act, the Women Peace and Security Act, and the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act.

        I am transmitting this letter from USAID for inclusion in the GAO's final report. Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the draft report, and for the courtesies extended by your staff while conducting this engagement.

                                        Sincerely,

                                        Rebecca Krzywda
                                        Rebecca Krzywda
                                        Deputy Assistant Administrator
                                        Bureau for Management

Appendix VI: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact	Nagla'a El-Hodiri, (202) 512-7279, or elhodirin@gao.gov
Staff Acknowledgments	In addition to the contact named above, Cheryl Goodman (Assistant Director), Claudia Rodriguez (Analyst in Charge), Maria Psara, Marc Rockmore, Debbie Chung, and Neil Doherty made key contributions to this report. Caitlin Cusati, Kate Farmer, Mike Hoffman, Benjamin Licht, Susan Murphy, Cary Russell, Alexander Welsh, and Sarah Veale provided additional assistance.