

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-246T](#), a statement before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The United States has engaged in multiple efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria since declaring a global war on terrorism in 2001. Currently, in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, U.S. forces are deployed under force management levels set by the administration. Force management levels and similar caps limit the number of U.S. military personnel deployed to a given region and have been a factor in military operations at least since the Vietnam War. Force management levels were also used to shape the drawdowns of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. In June 2016, the President announced that the force management level for Afghanistan is 9,800. According to DOD, in September 2016 the United States authorized additional troops for Iraq and Syria, for a total of 5,262.

Today's testimony discusses some of the actions DOD has taken to maximize military capabilities while operating under force management levels in ongoing operations.

In preparing this statement, GAO relied on previously published work related to operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria since 2001.

What GAO Recommends

GAO made 18 recommendations in prior work cited in this statement. DOD has implemented 12 of them. Continued attention is needed to ensure that some recommendations are addressed, such as improving visibility in total Special Operations funding to determine whether opportunities exist to balance deployments across the joint force.

View [GAO-17-246T](#). For more information, contact Cary Russell at (202) 512-5431 or RussellC@gao.gov.

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OVERSEAS CONTINGENCY OPERATIONS

Observations on the Use of Force Management Levels in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria

What GAO Found

Military officials planning for and executing operations under force management levels have taken various actions to maximize military capabilities deployed to countries under those limits, as discussed below:

- **Increased Engagement with Partner Nation Security Forces.** The Department of Defense (DOD) has increased its engagement with partner nations through advise-and-assist missions that rely on partner nation security forces to conduct operations. While this action helps leverage U.S. resources, it can create complications for U.S. planners in terms of allocating capabilities and resources. In 2011, GAO reported that the Army and Marine Corps have faced challenges in providing the necessary field grade officers and specialized capabilities for advisor teams, as well as challenges regarding the effect on the readiness and training of brigades whose combat teams have been split up to source advisor teams. GAO made three recommendations related to advisor teams. DOD concurred and implemented two recommendations relating to improving the ability of advisor teams to prepare for and execute their mission.
- **Reliance on Airpower.** DOD has relied on U.S. and coalition airpower to provide support to partner nation ground forces in lieu of U.S. ground combat capabilities. For example, since U.S. operations related to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) began in August 2014, coalition members have dropped more than 57,000 munitions. Air-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems have also proved critical to commanders by providing them timely and accurate information. While effective, this reliance on air power is not without its costs or challenges. For example, the Secretary of Defense stated in February 2016 that the intensity of the U.S. air campaign against ISIS has been depleting U.S. stocks of certain weapons.
- **Increased Pace of U.S. Special Operations Deployments.** DOD has increased its use of U.S. Special Operations Forces to increase its operational reach and maximize its capabilities under force management levels. However, the increased use of U.S. Special Operations Forces in operations has resulted in a high pace of deployments which can affect readiness, retention, and morale. GAO made 10 recommendations to DOD related to U.S. Special Operations Forces. DOD concurred or partially concurred and has implemented 7 recommendations relating to security force assistance activities and readiness of U.S. Special Operations Forces.
- **Increased Use of Contractors and Personnel on Temporary Duty.** DOD relies on contractors to support a wide range of military operations and free up uniformed personnel to directly support mission needs. During operations in Afghanistan and Iraq contractor personnel played a critical role in supporting U.S. troops and sometimes exceeded the number of deployed military personnel. However, the increased use of contractors and temporary personnel to provide support during operations has its challenges, including oversight of contractors in deployed environments. GAO made four recommendations to improve oversight of operational contract support. DOD concurred with all four, and has implemented three of them. GAO also made a recommendation that DOD develop guidance relating to costs of overseas operations, with which DOD partially concurred and which remains open.