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United States Department of State
and the Broadcasting Board of Governors
Office of Inspector General

Report of Inspection

Embassy Damascus, Syria

Report Number ISP-I-05-17A, July 2005

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KEY JUDGMENTS

- The Office of Inspector General (OIG) inspection took place during a period in which the U.S. Ambassador had been recalled, and the U.S. government was in the forefront pressing for the immediate withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. With a cadre of Middle East experts and superb interagency cooperation and coordination, Embassy Damascus is performing admirably.
- Sanctions imposed on Syria by the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SAA) (P.L. 108-175) and other U.S. policies meant to signal dissatisfaction with Syria are creating costs and barriers to embassy operations and programs. The embassy has adjusted well to these circumstances and is effectively promoting the tougher, sharply focused U.S. policy objectives.
- Embassy Damascus' vulnerable facilities and ever-present terrorism threat is a major challenge. The front office and regional security office (RSO) attentiveness to security matters greatly alleviates staff concerns and contributes to the mission's surprisingly high morale.
- Embassy efforts to move to a more secure new embassy compound (NEC) are stymied by Syrian government procrastination and delays. A move is likely to be some years off. Badly needed renovation of the consular section, repairs to the electrical system, and an upgrading of the telephone system should not be postponed.
- Given the cramped conditions on the embassy compound, only the most urgent staffing increases should be accommodated. An immediate priority is the approval of an office management specialist (OMS) position and the approval of a facilities management position. These will be offset by consular staff reductions.
- The Ambassador has invigorated the embassy's public diplomacy¹ programs. She is taking exceptional advantage of the public affairs section's (PAS) access to important Syrian audiences among the media, Islamic groups, nongovernmental organizations, and human rights groups to enhance the

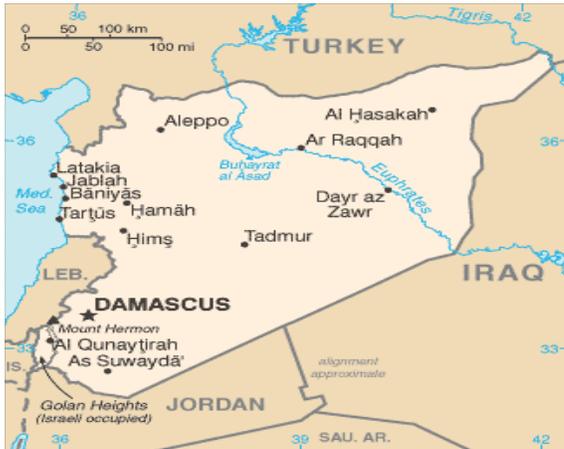
¹In this report, public diplomacy refers to the function of engaging, informing, and influencing key public international audiences. The public affairs section at an embassy directs public diplomacy.

embassy's insight into these high priority issues in Syria. The embassy's Fulbright and other exchange programs and its focused English-teaching programs enable it to reach a broader, younger Syrian audience.

- Consular operations are as efficient as possible under the constraints of space and limited access to local officials. The section continues to adjust staff levels to fit a declining workload, while remaining diligent on border security matters.
- The management officer and section merit commendation for addressing some long-standing shortcomings. However, the general services office (GSO) still needs more attention.
- The **(b)(2)(b)(6)(b)(2)(b)(6)** is important to the embassy and to the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA), which seek to attract bidders to the dwindling number of accompanied posts in the Middle East. The rent paid by the school to the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations (OBO) should be substantially reduced.

The inspection took place in Washington, DC, between January 3 and 28, 2005, and in Damascus, Syria, between February 18 and March 17, 2005. Willard A. DePree (team leader), Anita G. Schroeder (deputy team leader), Thomas Carmichael, Joseph S. Catalano, Ronald Harms, Vickie J. Huss, Gwendolyn G. Llewellyn, Mike Lynch, and Matthew S. Worner conducted the inspection.

CONTEXT



Damascus, Syria

Following the February 2005 assassination in Beirut of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri, U.S.-Syrian relations are at perhaps their lowest ebb in two decades. A clear symptom of the protracted nature of that difficult relationship is the President's decision in May 2004 to impose economic sanctions required by the SAA. The SAA sanctions primarily affect U.S. exports to Syria and make clear that bilateral ties will

not improve until the Syrian government takes comprehensive action in specific areas. Such actions include supporting U.S. objectives in Iraq, expelling extremist Palestinian leaders resident in Syria and stopping support for Hizballah in Lebanon, withdrawing Syrian forces from Lebanon, and ceasing the development of weapons of mass destruction. In addition, sanctions under Section 311 of the Patriot Act (P.L. 107-56), now held in abeyance, could also be implemented if the Syrian government fails to address money laundering and terrorist financing concerns, as well as U.S. demands for the return of frozen Iraqi assets held in Syria. There are periodic Congressional efforts to impose further sanctions.

Also following the Hariri assassination, international pressure is building for Syrian compliance with U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1559. This resolution calls for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon (until recently Syria had some 15,000 troops and security personnel there) and the disarming of all militias (the most significant of which is the Iranian/Syrian-supported group, Hizballah).

The Deputy Secretary visited Damascus in January 2005 to reinforce the message that the United States expected a more robust Syrian response to its demands for action. He highlighted the need for Syria to stop the infiltration of foreign fighters from Syria into Iraq, step up efforts to capture former Iraqi regime elements thought to be aiding the Iraqi insurgency from Syria, and comply with

UNSCR 1559. This visit reiterated much of the message delivered by the Assistant Secretary for NEA and his high-level delegation in September 2004. Periodic Congressional visitors have met with Syrian officials and conveyed the same general message. The Secretary of State has not visited Damascus since May 2003, when then-Secretary Powell previewed many of the U.S. demands subsequently embodied in the SAA.

Since the late 1970s, the United States has designated Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism. Nonetheless, the United States has treated Syria as a special case. Syria is the only country on the state sponsor of terrorism list in which the United States maintains a resident diplomatic embassy. Despite the presence of embassies in both capitals, all bilateral programs, except educational and cultural exchanges, have been cut off for some years.

The Syrian track of the peace process has been at a standstill since negotiations with Israel broke off in 2000. That stall mirrored - until the November 2004 death of Arafat and the January 2005 election of Abu Mazen - the three-year impasse on the Israeli-Palestinian side. Syrian President Bashar al-Asad has periodically sent out peace feelers, suggesting that Syria would be willing to resume negotiations without insisting that they start up where they left off. At present, however, the United States has made clear publicly that Syria needs to stop supporting terrorism if it wants to restart negotiations for the return of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

In spite of those severe challenges, Embassy Damascus has engaged with the Syrian government since the imposition of the SAA to further U.S. objectives. In some areas, including Iraqi-Syrian border security and Syrian-U.S. counterterrorism cooperation, that engagement has led to substantial progress, although more remains to be done. Responding in part to the embassy's urgings, the Syrian government also recently allowed the International Organization for Migration to conduct out-of-country voting for tens of thousands of Iraqi citizens in Syria, which contributed to the successful January 2005 elections in Iraq.

In policy dialogue with the Syrian government, embassy personnel have repeatedly reminded the government that the embassy is old and crowded and vulnerable to terrorist attack. The Syrian government has stalled in its efforts to develop a new diplomatic zone where it previously indicated it wanted the United States to build a new embassy. This, in turn, has stymied embassy efforts to locate property suitable for an NEC.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTION

OIG's inspection of Embassy Damascus took place at a time that highlighted the strength of the embassy's management and professionalism. OIG arrived four days after the February 14 car-bomb assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, which triggered the recall of the U.S. Ambassador to Syria. The recall was intended in part to let the Syrian government know that U.S. patience was wearing thin over the spoiler role Syria was playing in Lebanon and the Middle East. It was a clear message but left a hole in the embassy's leadership.

Fortunately, the Ambassador could pass stewardship of the embassy to a strong team led by a deputy chief of mission (DCM) who was respected by the Ambassador, the Department of State (Department), and his colleagues at post. The DCM, now the chargé d'affaires, had been public affairs officer (PAO) in Damascus from 1999 to 2002 and has a savvy grasp of Syrian and Middle East politics based on his experience in the region and as Lebanon-Syria Office Director in NEA. Moreover, Embassy Damascus is blessed with a cadre of a half dozen senior officers, all with considerable Middle East experience and most with a good working knowledge of Arabic.

Embassy relations with NEA are good. Administration policy discourages visits to Syria by senior Administration officials because the Syrian government might construe such visits as a warming of bilateral relations. Contacts and interaction between the embassy and NEA remain strong, even without the benefit of on-site visits by NEA officials. Two of NEA's deputy assistant secretaries served recently in Damascus, one as DCM and the other as PAO. The Ambassador, now in Washington, can ensure that embassy views are well represented in policy deliberations in the bureau and Department.

At the time of the inspection, the President and senior U.S. policymakers were pressing hard for Syria to comply fully and immediately with UNSCR 1559. As a result, the workload of Embassy Damascus had increased dramatically. Everyone at the embassy was working all out to meet Washington's expectations for timely, policy-oriented reporting and analysis. Embassy Damascus is showing that it is more than equal to the challenge. An example of this was the embassy's coverage of President Bashar al-Assad's March 5, 2005, speech before Parliament on UNSCR 1559 and Syrian-Lebanese relations. Washington policymakers eagerly

awaited this crucial embassy presentation. Knowing this, the chargé assembled key embassy officers and the embassy's Foreign Service national (FSN) translator in the chancery on the weekend to listen to the speech, some of it in Arabic and the rest in simultaneous English translation. This enabled the embassy within minutes to provide the Department's Lebanon working group with the embassy's initial observations on the speech. When the official Arabic text became available, the embassy submitted a more extensive analysis, an inclusive product based on insights from officers throughout the embassy.

In the year the Ambassador was at post she had nurtured a close-knit and smoothly functioning team. The Ambassador met twice a week with the country team; the second meeting was one to which other members of the staff, including entry-level officers, were invited. In addition, the Ambassador or DCM have held weekly meetings with the RSO, PAO, and management officer, as well as with the defense attaché and other section heads. The chargé has continued with these meetings, but with events breaking so rapidly, he is seeing some of the key personnel at post two or three times a day. Information at Embassy Damascus is fully shared.

The weekly meeting of reporting officers, which are chaired by the chargé, is one of the most useful team meetings at the embassy. At these meetings, reporting officers share information, assess its significance, and receive their reporting assignments. Everyone is encouraged to participate, and they do. These frank, but directed meetings solicit diverse perspectives and make those participating feel themselves an important part of the embassy team. These meetings give embassy reporting a strong policy focus and contribute to post morale, which is surprisingly good considering the current strained relations between Syria and the United States and the ever-present concerns about personal security. (The safety issue is discussed in the classified inspection report.)

Reporting on Syrian government policies, attitudes, and basic economic statistics and political fact, is a major challenge for the embassy. Access to senior Syrian government officials, which for years has not been good, has grown progressively worse since the passage of the SAA in December 2003. With bilateral relations currently at perhaps the lowest ebb in decades, embassy officers are constrained in what they say and do, lest they suggest that the U.S. government is prepared to improve relations before Syria complies fully with the SAA.

The front office has exhibited strong leadership in public diplomacy. Finding it difficult to penetrate government circles, the embassy has been searching for other avenues to get its message to Syrians and to champion the Administration's long-term goals of democracy and peace in the Middle East. Although embassy officers

find Syrians in general reticent to associate with official Americans in Syria's police-state environment, the embassy has found that a major conduit for that message can be based on the appetite of Syrian governmental and private individuals and entities to receive U.S. educational assistance. (They are particularly eager for English language training and other cultural and educational exchange programs.) Under the strong and personal leadership of the Ambassador, the embassy has begun to shift public diplomacy in this direction. The embassy has adjusted its latest Mission Performance Plan (MPP) to reflect this new policy direction. The embassy is also seeking to learn whether Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) funds might be available to underwrite programs in Syria that demonstrably promote long-term U.S. policy goals of democratic reform.

Strong criticism by the President and Secretary of State of Syria following the February assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister in Beirut and of the February 25 suicide bombing in Tel Aviv have been given prominent play in the Syrian media. This has prompted concerns among Syrians and Americans in Syria that the United States may be contemplating action to back up the rhetoric. Given this climate of uncertainty and fear, the embassy is paying close attention to the security and morale of Americans and embassy personnel.

During the inspection, the emergency action committee met twice to consider what action the embassy should take in light of developments. The meetings, chaired by the chargé, were textbook examples of how such meetings should be conducted: All key embassy personnel participated; all felt free to voice their opinions; the discussion was thorough but to the point; appropriate and workable courses of action were discussed; and agreement was reached on what the embassy should do. Equally important, there was agreement on what the embassy should not do, lest these actions unduly alarm the American community. The attentiveness of embassy management and the RSO to security received high marks on OIG's questionnaire, another reason why morale at Embassy Damascus is good.

Clear policy direction, professionalism in the workplace, and common courtesy also support a satisfying environment for embassy officers. Embassy management displays a genuine interest in employee career development and is developing a structured entry-level officers' mentoring program, which will complement ad hoc discussion and thoughtful advice.

Embassy management also ensures the embassy employees are familiar with Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policies and procedures. An EEO counseling team helps inform and enforce standards, and embassy management uses mandatory EEO seminars and cultural awareness training to underline the priority it places on these issues.

The Ambassador and DCM oversee the embassy's visa referral system and visas viper committee. They frequently raise consular issues, such as child-abduction cases, with high-level Syrian government officials and support a rich consular role in the MPP. They encourage all sections of the embassy to share with consular officers information on counterterrorism and law enforcement.

EMBASSY DAMASCUS ISSUES

EMBASSY RIGHTSIZING UNDER CURRENT COMPOUND CONDITIONS

Because of security needs and the poor state of embassy facilities, Embassy Damascus has placed a high priority on moving to a more secure NEC. The urgent need for an NEC was highlighted in 2000 when the embassy compound was attacked and penetrated by anti-American demonstrators. The search for an NEC has been actively pursued since September 2000 when the Syrian government informed the embassy of its intention to earmark land in a diplomatic zone for future embassy construction. But, while professing to be working on its site layout and infrastructure plan, the Syrian government continues to procrastinate. The embassy does not know when the Syrian government may be ready to disclose its plans for the diplomatic site and make property available for purchase.

Were the Syrian government to disclose its plan within the next six months and make a site available that met all of OBO's requirements, it is doubtful whether OBO could move quickly enough to survey and purchase a site, design the embassy, and complete construction before FY 2008. Moreover, given the current strained relations between the two countries, the U.S. government may not wish to rush to acquire a site in the diplomatic zone, lest the Syrian government sees this eagerness as a sign that diplomatic relations with the U.S. government are assured even if Syria drags its feet on compliance with UNSCR 1559 and the SAA. The U.S. government may not want to send this signal. On the other hand, insisting that Syria offers land is a way to have it demonstrate its commitment to the relationship.

If moving into an NEC is not likely to occur before FY 2008, then more attention must be placed on upgrading existing embassy facilities to ensure embassy operations take place in a safe and secure environment that meets OBO and Bureau of Diplomatic Security (DS) regulations and standards. (OIG's classified report on Embassy Damascus security makes recommendations for improving security on the present site.) In its FY 2006 MPP, Embassy Damascus requested funding for a major electrical upgrade and for renovation of consular space. OBO has provided \$265,000 for the consular renovations. Funding for the electrical

overhaul has not yet been authorized. OIG strongly endorses its approval. If and when the electrical systems are upgraded, it may be cost effective to simultaneously upgrade the current telephone system, which is about at capacity and for which the embassy has set aside \$60,000.

The 56 Americans and 192 FSNs who make up the embassy workforce are cramped for space. The demands for office space are compounded by the inordinately large number of temporary-duty personnel who visit the post, some of them for extended periods.

In its February 15, 2005, rightsizing cable, the embassy indicated that it could reduce its American staffing by three, beginning in 2006. At the same time it has requested in its recently submitted FY 2007 MPP that the Department approve the addition of a facilities maintenance officer and another OMS for the political and economic sections. Were these positions approved, there would be a reduction of only one in the overall current number of authorized American positions at Embassy Damascus. Also, the Foreign Agricultural Service has indicated it may move to Beirut but has provided no timetable. Such a move would require approvals from several Washington offices and the embassy, as well as space at the already tight compound in Beirut. However, the move would make additional available office space available.

Embassy management is well aware that they must provide office accommodations for any additional personnel. They realize, however, that they soon will not be able to support any further increases unless they are offset by corresponding staffing reductions elsewhere.

The embassy's options are limited, although it may wish to request DS to reevaluate for use as offices the currently underutilized Hafez Building. Although DS has refused to grant a waiver for this building to be used as offices, the building might be eligible for a conditional waiver if it could be sufficiently hardened or reconfigured. The closure of the public diplomacy library also provides additional space for conversion to office use.

POLICY AND PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SECTIONS

The Ambassador provides effective direction to Embassy Damascus' political and economic sections and has extensive area expertise and a practical understanding of local culture and conditions. Her instructions for political and economic reports are clear and concise, and she encourages the best from a solid staff that is working in an extremely difficult political environment.

The DCM has a firm, but collegial and inclusive management style in meetings and elsewhere; this clearly reinforces good relationships among the economic and political sections. He insists on sharply focused mission reporting, sets realistic drafting deadlines, and sees that they are met. One officer noted that the DCM's sharply focused editing of her reports has helped to "take my cables to a higher level."

The embassy management shares a common area with the political and economic sections, allowing ad hoc meetings to be held in one another's offices and resulting in excellent communication among these elements.

A comprehensive set of meetings addresses political, economic, and public diplomacy issues and synchronizes the work of these sections. The FSNs of the political section and PAS offer a daily press briefing for the front office, and the political, economic, and public affairs officers. The weekly reports meeting provides a more comprehensive sorting of issues. The country team also meets in limited and extended formats. OIG could not observe the Ambassador's management of such meetings, but can vouch for the well-directed nature of the meeting chaired by the DCM in the Ambassador's absence. The DCM leads firmly but solicits opinions and information from all with humor and respect for dissent.

Embassy Damascus uses the access to the Syrian government generated by congressional delegations and other VIPs to carry U.S. policy messages to the highest levels of the Syrian government. Paradoxically, VIP visits may suggest to

the Syrian government that the visitors' interest in meeting reflects a desire for warmer bilateral relations without the necessary changes in Syrian government's behavior.

The political and economic sections badly need an OMS to maintain classified files and reading material, provide administrative and logistical support, and draft routine correspondence for both sections. The OMS also must coordinate the increasing load of translations and diplomatic notes required by the Syrian government for transactions and even simple communications. The OMS serving the political and economic sections is in an eligible family member OMS position that could be converted to a Foreign Service OMS position. The FY 2007 MPP requests the conversion. OIG agrees with the high priority of this position for political and economic section operations and endorses this request.

Political Section

The political chief manages a section of seven officers, including three first-tour officers. His young staff needs significant career and operational guidance, as well as extensive editing of their cables. The section chief is never overbearing and is accessible to his staff, which enjoys his management style. He is looking forward to strengthening his mentoring role for younger staff.

The political section chief has good, productive relations with his counterpart in the economic/commercial/agricultural section and with the Defense attaché, who clears cables with the political section and appreciates their comments and suggestions.

Access to Syrian government officials is extraordinarily limited and in meetings they often provide little or no information. On the other hand, the Syrian government requirement that practically all activity must be presented through diplomatic channels for their reference and/or agreement creates a heavy administrative burden to even these encounters. The political section, therefore, is expanding its contacts beyond government officials to journalists, civil society activists, and people on the fringes of government. Finding Syrian observers who can penetrate the country's opaque political machine remains frustrating, and the embassy at times must acknowledge this difficulty and base its reporting on second-hand information or informed speculation.

The quality of the embassy's political and economic reporting from this difficult environment is high. Reporting officers take great care to produce their best work, using their meager information resources. OIG's preinspection survey of the

reports' Washington readers indicated the readers understand these constraints and nonetheless are impressed with the embassy's ability to develop useful information and are pleased with the quality of reporting. However, OIG did find Washington readers needed to explain more clearly the reporting themes they would like the section to address.

The political chief is the note taker for the Ambassador's meetings with top Syrian officials, and reporting cables from those encounters are well written and useful. His regular bi-monthly assessment by cable of the state of U.S.-Syrian relations contains useful, categorized observations that quickly familiarize readers with the situation. Embassy Damascus' human rights reporting also is good and includes timely spot updates. This year's Human Rights Report reflected close cooperation between the post and the Department.

The political chief has been getting out of Damascus and, in his seven months at post, has accompanied the Ambassador twice to Aleppo and once to Latakia. These trips were well planned to maximize their effectiveness and included visits with political, economic, and public diplomacy individual and institutional contacts. Political officers have also joined the Defense attaché on his visits to the Iraq border and elsewhere.

Economic, Commercial, and Agricultural Section

The chief of the economic/commercial section supervises four officers and two FSNs in economic and commercial affairs and one Foreign Agricultural Service FSN. The chief has good relations with the front office, the political section, and other entities, and his colleagues and staff regard him highly. He was made acting DCM when the Ambassador was recalled in February.

The chief is a collegial manager, and his section's meeting schedule reflects his inclusive style. The economic/commercial/agricultural section has two regular weekly staff meetings - one for U.S. officers and another for all staff members. The economic section chief supervises young officers and must dedicate much time to mentoring them and closely reviewing their reporting for substance and style. He attaches great importance to this time-consuming but necessary responsibility.

The workload of the economic/commercial section has changed since souring U.S.-Syria political relations and SAA sanctions decimated commercial relations. The section's reports on Syrian actions on suppressing terrorism financing have helped Washington decisionmakers implement sanctions. The section's responsibility to support the modest bilateral commercial activity has been replaced by the

new responsibilities for monitoring the SAA. To reflect this change, the section has reformatted the Country Commercial Guide to elaborate, among other changes, on procedures required by the Department of Commerce. These include prelicense checks or post-shipment verifications of goods permitted under the SAA, such as medical supplies and equipment and aircraft parts. The section is also charged with explaining the sanction regimes to its Syrian clients - some of them agents of major U.S. companies. These commercial activities and contacts are a source of scarce information about Syria, its government, and policies, but the access requires considerable staff time.

The cable 05 Damascus 816, titled "Part I - Rightsizing Recommendations for Embassy Damascus," proposes that the two entry-level-officer rotational positions be consolidated into a single FS-03 economic/commercial position who would be the deputy to the economic/commercial section chief. The addition of a deputy with an extended tour would give the section more management and continuity than a section chief alone can provide. The restructuring would strengthen the section's management depth, support embassy management more adequately, and give surer and more productive attention to the potential this section has for reporting through its commercial activities and sanctions work. The changes in the American positions would dictate a sharpening of job descriptions for the section's two economic/commercial assistants. The possibility that the Foreign Agricultural Service may move its office to Beirut also would result in the two FSNs assuming responsibility for covering some agricultural issues. Furthermore, elimination of the two entry-level-officer rotational positions on the consular side of the proposal would provide significant rightsizing benefits.

Recommendation 1: The Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, in coordination with the Bureau of Consular Affairs and the Office of Rightsizing, should approve the embassy's rightsizing proposal in the cable 05 Damascus 816, to consolidate two entry-level-officer economic/consular rotational positions into a single FS-03 economic/commercial position. (Action: NEA, in coordination with CA and M/R)

PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The Ambassador has reinvigorated the public diplomacy program and understands that the work of the PAS provides insight into Syria and is a conduit for the U.S. message to elites and to broader and younger audiences. She consults regularly

with her PAO to maximize her management of the embassy's public diplomacy programs and hosts events for the PAS. She also encourages embassy officers to work with their PAS colleagues to cultivate contacts in the fields of human rights, civil society, and women's issues. The DCM served as PAO in Damascus from 1999 to 2002 and is an important resource to the Ambassador. The PAS actively contributed to the MPP and ensured public diplomacy elements were written into all appropriate sections.

The PAO supervises two American officers. The assistant PAO is the embassy press officer and oversees the section's English-teaching programs and the PAS information resource center/library. The cultural affairs officer oversees the PAS exchanges portfolio, including the Fulbright program, the International Visitor program, the Youth Exchange and Study program, and the Partnerships for Learning Undergraduate Studies program. The latter two programs represent a major expansion of the cultural affairs officer's exchanges portfolio, which has been augmented by the nontraditional exchange programs that Washington has recently been implementing. The assistant PAO and cultural affairs officer share the cultural programming portfolio. A three-officer staffing structure ensures that the PAS has adequate human resources to handle these complex, busy portfolios, and staffing should be maintained at this level. Each week, the PAO holds a section staff meeting and also meets with the DCM.

The embassy's daily review for key officers of media reports relevant to U.S. policy in Syria is crisp and comprehensive. The review helps synchronize these officers' perspectives and keeps them as informed as possible within Syria's state-run media environment. In the meeting, the PAS information assistant and the chief political assistant cover local, regional, and international media, including conventional, Internet-based, long established, and up-and-coming news and opinion sources. The front office, PAO, assistant PAO, and economic and political section chiefs attend the meeting and contribute.

The PAS continues to test the waters for an increase in media placements in Syria. The state-run Syrian media is generally closed to U.S. government products, but a Syrian government-owned daily recently published a pro-American op-ed article written by General George Casey and Ambassador John Negroponte extolling the success of the Iraqi elections. PAS also has placed informational items under the Ambassador's signature to commemorate the September 11, 2001, victims and to promote study in the United States. Embassy officers nurture media contacts for their insights and potential for greater cooperation in a future, changed Syrian media environment.

The PAS offices are in the embassy cultural center of the PD building, which is a block from the chancery. The center also contains an auditorium for embassy and public diplomacy events and a library. Dozens of young Syrians attend weekly film showings and discussion groups in the auditorium, one of them led by the PAO.

The PAS has not maintained the library's book collection due to inadequate budgets, and its nonfiction books are obsolete. This and the close, intimidating Syrian government surveillance of visitors makes library patrons rare. The embassy, therefore, has decided to close the traditional library. It will donate the collection to the American Corners and convert much of the library to badly needed office space.

The library staff, however, does carry out an MPP-driven information outreach program. It also hosts computer training for target audiences, provides public access to the Internet for research and other purposes, and has a periodicals collection. OIG informally recommended that space be provided for a modest reading room for use of MPP-related periodicals, the fiction collection, and American novels written in English.

The PAO studied and taught in the region before joining the Foreign Service and is fluent in Arabic. His representational outreach to non-English speakers is one of the most extensive in the embassy. He has wide access to academic, civil society, human rights, Islamic, and media circles. He understands the value of these contacts to the embassy and increasingly invites officers from other sections to his representational events. The PAS FSNs are well connected and target the right audiences.

The PAO maintains a close eye on his budgets and has urged NEA's Office of Press and Public Diplomacy to expand his base public diplomacy allotment to a level more appropriate for a country of great regional importance to the Administration. He calculates that, after he pays his fixed expenses, essential overhead costs, and routine activities costs such as Washington File and information resource center outreach, he has only \$8,280 for discretionary grants. This is too little for program flexibility. Washington bureaus provide funds for their own programs in Syria, but the bureau should increase the Embassy Damascus public diplomacy base allotment to allow the embassy to address its programming needs through more of its discretionary grants.

Recommendation 2: The Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs should seek additional funds or review its budget priorities among posts to increase Embassy Damascus' public diplomacy base allotment and allow the embassy to address local programming options more effectively through more of its discretionary grants. (Action: NEA)

Some Washington observers consider Embassy Damascus' Fulbright Program one of the best in the region. Its MPP-driven American Studies activities are a core Fulbright Program agenda. American scholars on the Fulbright Senior Scholar Program work throughout the country. The Junior Fulbright Program is enhancing Arabic language skills and area expertise among young American scholars. PAS takes good care of its American Fulbrighters and programs them in Syria as speakers, which helps the Fulbrighters and PAS. OIG has suggested that PAS take advantage of the Fulbright Senior Specialist Program to augment its program mix.

America-Mideast Educational and Training Services, Inc. (AMIDEAST), a regional nongovernmental educational, developmental, and information organization, is an effective partner to the PAS in its student advising, English-teaching, and exchange programs. It collaborates with PAS on the recruitment and processing of Syrians for the Fulbright, Youth Exchange and Study program, and Partnerships for Learning Undergraduate Studies program through Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) grants.

OIG attended a tea party held for Partnerships for Learning Undergraduate Studies program students and hosted by the chargé. OIG also attended a film discussion for ACCESS (English-language) microscholarship recipients hosted by the PAO. OIG was struck by the diversity of ethnic and economic backgrounds, some of them very modest. Clearly, the PAS is reaching new, diverse, younger, and broader audiences in its exchange programs.

AMIDEAST also carries out educational advising under an ECA grant and with its Regional Educational Advising Coordinator support. The number of visas applied for and issued to Syrian citizens to attend U.S. universities dropped dramatically after September 11, 2001. AMIDEAST educational advisors are now actively fighting misperceptions that it is very difficult for Syrian students to receive U.S. visas and that Americans and U.S. universities do not welcome Syrian students. Nevertheless, PAS, AMIDEAST, and the consular section should coordinate outreach more closely on these and other issues, and OIG made an informal recommendation on this subject.

The PAS has a comprehensive approach to expanding English-language competency among Syrians. The Internet and satellite television are increasingly common in Syria, and the English language can provide critical access to facts and perspectives that will enhance the country's successor generation's appreciation of democratic reforms and principles - the core of the U.S. agenda in the region. The PAS and AMIDEAST both conduct well-managed and mutually supportive English-teaching programs. They have different target audiences, but both are based on American cultural content.

AMIDEAST runs an English-teaching program for children on its premises, manages the American Language Center's direct English-teaching program for college students and adults, and provides free courses through the ACCESS microscholarship program. AMIDEAST representatives say the organization would like to develop an American Language Center branch facility in Aleppo, Syria's second largest city. Such a move would effectively complement embassy public diplomacy activity. OIG informally recommended the embassy support the center, diplomatically if not financially.

The PAS targets English-teaching professionals and manages ECA's English Teaching Fellow program, which provides seminars for Syrian professionals at universities and other higher education institutions throughout Syria. It also hosts a prestigious annual English-teaching conference, distributes 700 copies of ECA's "English Teaching Forum" quarterly to Syrian contacts, and holds English-language film showings and discussion groups.

In 2004, anti-U.S. demonstrations upset several cultural performance programs, causing the PAS to choose its programs and venues wisely. The PAS held a successful cultural performance recently and hopes to continue these programs. It also has American Corners in Damascus and Suweida and plans similar facilities in Latakia and Homs.

MEPI funds are not available to Embassy Damascus for programs in Syria because of legal issues now under review in Washington. When these issues are resolved, MEPI funds could be used in Syria for programs such as journalism ethics training, women's rights and entrepreneurial development programs, nongovernmental organization management training, conflict resolution programs, and other programs that promote democratic transformation in the Middle East. Embassy Damascus recently requested Department authorization of MEPI funding support for such high-priority programs.

Recommendation 3: The Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, in coordination with the Office of the Legal Adviser, should seek agreement to permit use of Middle East Partnership Initiative funding so that Embassy Damascus may support democratic reform and social justice programs. (Action: NEA, in coordination with L)

CONSULAR OPERATIONS

Consular operations are constrained by a cramped consular section work area and limited access to host country officials. The embassy received authorization on February 18 from OBO (STATE 30005) to spend \$256,000 to address the section's space problem.

Despite these constraints, the section is efficient and complies with Department regulations. With the opening of Embassy Beirut for full visa services, Embassy Damascus has reduced its nonimmigrant visa (NIV) and immigrant visa (IV) workload and its Foreign Service officer and FSN staff. A recent rightsizing telegram (DAMASCUS 816) outlined further appropriate reductions. Currently, three of the entry-level officers are in rotational positions, which reduces their effectiveness as consular officers. Under the proposed reduction, there will be only one entry-level officer rotational position.

Under active front office oversight, the embassy's referral policy is working well. Interviewing officers are not subjected to any undue pressure to issue visas. Embassy management frequently weighs in with host country officials on consular matters, such as child-abduction cases. The chargé is now reviewing the consular section chief's visa decisions, as required by 9 FAM 41.121. The consular section is part of a large number of the embassy's MPP strategies and tactics. Visa officers are well briefed by other sections of the embassy on information about border security.

The most time-consuming work in the American citizens services unit is that associated with its 23 active child-abduction/custody cases. The fraud prevention unit (FPU) is under guidance of the recently arrived deputy consular section chief, who is rapidly expanding the unit's activities.

The section is in the initial stages of implementing a "user pays" telephone-answering system and a visa passback system. Although the host government's control of the media limits public diplomacy options, the section can make better use of the PAS's resources, especially to increase student visa numbers.

Consular Space

In contrast to its spacious public waiting room, the consular section's work area is cramped and poorly designed. There are too few desks for the FSNs and only two officers have offices with any line of sight of the FSNs. Even those officers cannot see the cashier/receptionist windows. Furthermore, there is no clear space for processing visas, and the interview windows are not up to par. The space problem is one of the biggest constraints on the effectiveness of the section. It lowers morale of FSNs and officers, reduces efficiency, and could lead to internal management control problems.

In November 2004, the embassy submitted a proposal to the Department (04Damascus 6269) for a "consular improvement initiative" that would move the work area up to 15 feet into the waiting room, reconfigure interview windows, and redesign other parts of the section. On February 18, 2005, OBO informed the embassy that \$256,000 had been authorized for the project (STATE 30005).

Consular Staffing

With Embassy Beirut resuming full NIV services in 2003 and full IV services in November 2004, Embassy Damascus reduced its visa workload considerably. As a result, the embassy went from 13 to 12 FSN positions and dropped one Foreign Service officer position. It now has seven authorized Foreign Service officer positions, but two are vacant. If the Department approves the embassy's rightsizing proposal (DAMASCUS 816), the embassy will reduce to five authorized Foreign Service officer positions starting in the summer of 2006. OIG supports the proposal, which meets workload projections.

One concern is the number of entry-level-officer rotational positions. Officers in these positions spend only one year doing consular work, then rotate to another section. This is a weakness in the visa process, particularly for a mission in the Middle East. By the time a visa-interviewing officer has developed expertise, it is time to move to another section. Officers also do not always get to rotate within the consular section. At the moment, three of the consular positions are entry-level rotational positions. The rightsizing proposal eliminates two entry-level rotational positions while maintaining two two-year consular assignments and one entry-level rotational position. OIG supports the proposal to change two entry-level rotational positions into consular assignments.

Consular Management and Oversight

The embassy front office actively oversees the embassy's visa referral policy. The Ambassador or DCM must approve Class A referrals before they are sent to the consular section chief. The policy is well understood throughout the embassy, and there is no undue pressure put on the NIV officers. Embassy management includes the consular chief in all appropriate meetings. The Ambassador raises consular issues, such as child abduction and custody cases, frequently with high-level Syrian officials. The consular section's responsibilities in the MPP are robust. The MPP shows that the section is expected to contribute to seven tactics and has a large role in one strategy. After counseling by OIG, the DCM began reviewing the consular section chief's visa decisions in the Consolidated Consular Database, as required by 9 FAM 41.121.

The section knows of the morale issues that arise from its space problems and recently conducted teambuilding exercises to improve relations among the staff. The section also increased the number of standard operating procedures. The section, however, lacks an effective public-inquiry telephone answering system. The section chief has started consultations with the Bureau of Consular Affairs to determine the best available "user pays" system for the section. Also an effort has begun to adopt a visa passback that would let visa applicants receive their stamped passports by courier, rather than having to return to the embassy to pick them up.

Visa Services

Lebanese IV applicants, who filed their cases in Damascus before Embassy Beirut resumed IV services in November 2004, still may go to Damascus for visa processing. The number of these Lebanese cases will gradually dwindle, but the work required to close inactive cases will be a burden. The Lebanese cases fill four large file cabinets and take up valuable space. The planned reduction of consular officer positions makes this Lebanese IV workload more of a burden. Embassy Beirut receives assistance from the National Visa Center, which has assumed responsibility for sending out the instructions to applicants. OIG informally recommended that the embassy contact the Bureau of Consular Affairs and the National Visa Center for assistance with processing the Lebanese IV cases and transferring old IV files to the center.

OIG looked into the viability of Embassy Damascus handling certain Iraqi IV cases. It is easier for Iraqis in the northern part of their country to access Damascus than Amman. In fact, many Iraqis pass through Damascus on their way to

Amman. In addition, some Kurds are more comfortable traveling in Syria than in Jordan. Therefore, there are advantages to having Embassy Damascus handle Iraqis from the northern half of Iraq. Without knowing how many applicants this might entail, OIG cannot assess the staffing needed for the consular section to absorb this work.

The NIV unit is keenly aware of its border security and technology transfer responsibilities. Every new NIV officer is briefed by other sections of the embassy with useful information on counterterrorism. The interviewing officers say there is a continuous sharing of such information. In addition, the visas viper meetings are used for general discussions of security issues. The interviewing officers are clear in how to use Section 214b of the Immigration and Naturalization Act to refuse an applicant who may intend to harm the United States.

The NIV unit pays particular attention to applicants who might be involved in unauthorized technology transfer or in efforts to avoid the economic sanctions on Syria. After discussions with the Bureau of Consular Affairs in October 2004, the unit strengthened its visas mantis program. It now sends a mantis cable, requesting review and clearance on applicants whose background raises technology transfer concerns, even if the stated purpose of the applicant's visit appears innocuous. As a result the unit sends in about three mantis cases each week; previously, it sent about 30 per year. The cases take on average three weeks to clear.

The Bureau of Consular Affairs recently notified the consular section that it had one of the highest percentages of poor fingerprints of visa applicants. The post is currently working with the bureau to identify and correct the cause.

American Citizens Services

A smooth-functioning system of about 100 wardens is used to contact the 3,600 registered Americans in emergencies. An estimated 6,000 Americans live in Syria. The most time-consuming American citizens services work is the child abduction/custody cases. Each active case involves numerous diplomatic notes to Syria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and frequent meetings are needed just to arrange even a telephone call with the local parent. The consular section is doing as good a job as possible with these cases and has received support from the front office, congressional delegations, and high-level Department officials. A spreadsheet with up-to-date information on all childrens' cases is sent to the Department quarterly.

The emergency action plan is well crafted, and embassy planning for potential evacuation is thorough. However, there is overly restricted and bureaucratic communication with local officials, and this has limited the amount of planning the consular section has done for disasters such as airplane crashes. The American citizens services FSN has been able to work around the bureaucracy when necessary, but the section lacks a disaster plan along the lines of that in the Disaster Assistance Handbook. OIG informally recommended that the section make more of an effort to discuss with Syrian officials and airline managers how an air crash or other such disaster would be handled. Answers to questions, such as who would do DNA testing and where task forces would be set up, may be provided in those cases where the Syrian government believes it is in its interest to cooperate.

The section does not have a space designated for protecting the property of deceased Americans that would be controlled only by the responsible officer. OIG informally recommended that it identify such a space.

Fraud Prevention Unit

With the arrival of the new deputy section chief, the FPU has been revived. Staff shortages caused by the embassy's support for Embassy Baghdad in 2004 reduced the attention paid to FPU operations. OIG believes that this did not result in any noticeable vulnerability, but communication with the Office of Consular Fraud Prevention in the Bureau of Consular Affairs suffered. In the last few months, the fraud prevention officer has drafted several standard operating procedures governing antifraud operations. She has increased the involvement of the part-time antifraud FSN and has initiated more frequent contact with the Office of Consular Fraud Prevention. An active international, consular officer, working group in Damascus discusses fraud matters of common interest. Although fraud is not too sophisticated in Syria, local documents are often suspect. Sham marriages are the biggest problem. The fraud prevention officer is aware of the border security aspects of the FPU's work. OIG informally recommended that the embassy make the fraud prevention officer responsible for compiling and analyzing information from other sections of the embassy on counterterrorism, crime, and technology transfer as it relates to consular work. This will enable the section to have a more focused approach to these issues.

Consular Use of Public Diplomacy

The Syrian government exercises strong control over Syrian media, making it difficult for the embassy to place articles in the newspapers. However, there are

outreach opportunities available to the consular section that should be used more frequently. The Bureau of Consular Affairs has asked embassies to promote study in the United States to recover some of the student numbers lost after September 11, 2001, and to warn the public about visa fraud. (Student visa issuances in Damascus dropped from 367 in FY 2001 to 76 in FY 2004.) Outreach could also help increase the number of visa applicants using the new electronic visa application. The PAO can help ensure that the consular section contacts the organizations involved in overseas study, such as AMIDEAST, and invites them to participate in education fairs. The PAO also can advise the section on using the embassy web site to promote study in the United States. The consular section can use its contribution to the PAO's monthly booklet to promote other matters of interest. OIG informally recommended that the consular section chief meet regularly with the PAO to discuss public diplomacy opportunities.

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

RESOURCE SUMMARY

Agency	Direct-hire positions (filled)	Direct-hire positions (authorized)	Locally employed staff positions (filled)	Locally employed staff positions (Authorized)
Department of State	46	47	190	202
Department of Defense	4	4	1	1
Marine Guard Detachment	6	6	—	—
Department of Agriculture	0	0	1	1
Totals	56	57	192	204

The FY 2004 budget included these line-items: D&CP - \$1,240,489, Public Diplomacy - \$325,899, International Cooperative Administrative Support Services (ICASS) - \$2,551,975, OBO - \$1,336,366, DS Security - \$304,256, DS Surveillance Detection - \$196,400, and Representation - \$41,600.

OVERVIEW

The embassy has 47 American employees who work for the Department, eight more than during the 1998 inspection. Embassy Damascus is a two-year post offering one rest and relaxation break, a 20-percent post differential, and a consumables allowance. Resolving long-standing real property issues concerning an NEC, a new school site, and the Aleppo property remain major embassy goals.

The quality of Embassy Damascus' administrative services, with a few exceptions in general services, is quite good. The quality of administrative services had slipped in prior years but, with the arrival of the new management officer, quality is improving. Improvements in the housing pool have alleviated some customer dissatisfaction with general services, but maintenance of residential property remains problematic, as do some of its other services. Overall management of general services received a low score on OIG's workplace and quality of life questionnaire, and concerns remain about this office's attention to customer service. Administrative procedures and notices are being revised and brought into line with current post realities. The housing handbook, the motor pool policy, phone policy, and other policies are now being redrafted. The embassy has drafted ICASS standards for measuring the delivery of administrative services. Management's access to the graded performance of its ICASS service providers will help to address weak performance.

MANAGEMENT OPERATIONS

Overall, Embassy Damascus' management operations, with some exceptions, are effectively and efficiently administered. The embassy's FY 2007 MPP requests an FP-03 facilities maintenance specialist, and the importance of adding this position cannot be overstated. Addition of this position would recognize the chancery and residential housing needs and the needs of an NEC.

The management officer is highly qualified and has customer service savvy. Although relatively new to this post, she has established a close relationship with the DCM and the Ambassador and is seeking remedies to some long-standing issues. She has installed a needed sense of direction in management operations and a heightened attention to customer service and communications within management operations are improving. GSO and the financial management office are now improving their coordination, and GSO is improving its customer service and responsiveness to and follow-up on work orders. Going forward, the management officer's attention to real estate issues will occupy significant time.

REAL ESTATE

The embassy compound is located on a residential street that has other embassies. The embassy compound has three government-owned buildings: the chancery, the administrative annex, and the Hafez Building. A construction project has been

funded to relieve overcrowding in the chancery's consular section. The bottom floor of the GSO building is rented space, and other tenants occupy the building's upper floors. The Hafez Building, purchased in 1997 to relieve overcrowding in the chancery, is not being used as a permanent facility because DS did not provide a Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act of 1999 waiver. Therefore, the building is used chiefly for GSO workshops and storage. The public diplomacy building, a leased property across the street from the chancery, houses the PAS, the economic/commercial section, the agricultural office, the health unit, and the community liaison office (CLO). The closure of the PAS library will free up space for office use.

New Embassy Compound

Since 2001, OBO has been actively working with this post and the Syrian government to acquire a suitable plot of land for construction of an NEC, which is expected to be located in a new diplomatic zone. However, the Syrian government has made little progress developing its plan for a new diplomatic zone. The delay is due in part to legal issues involving ownership of many parcels within the proposed diplomatic zone, the need to evict squatters living on land within the zone, and bureaucracy and intransigence on the Syrian government's part. To date, the actual site of the NEC in the zone has not been identified. OBO has identified four potential areas with acceptable boundaries and has provided Syrian officials with the minimum infrastructure requirements to support an NEC, such as utilities, sewage, water, and paved roads. OBO has requested 80,000 square meters of land in a rectangular shape aligned along north/south, east/west axis. Once the Syrian government completes its master plan, OBO will make a site selection and negotiate for 20 acres for the NEC. Alternatively, the embassy has been pressing the Syrian government to let the embassy negotiate for land for an NEC outside of the diplomatic zone.

(b)(2)(b)(6)(b)(2)(b)(6)

Although listed as excess property, the government-owned, four-acre "Garden Site" remains unsold and occupied by the (b)(2)(b)(6)(b)(2)(b)(6). In December 1997, the Real Property Advisory Board recommended the site be sold, and the school was given three years to vacate. At the time, OBO informed the post that if the September 2001 deadline could not be met, the U.S. government would no longer permit the (b)(2)(b)(6) to occupy the property rent-free. The school paid its first rental payment of \$125,000 during the 2002-03 school year. Each year the rent goes up by \$25,000. This year, rent is \$200,000. In sum, the school has paid \$466,667.

Until the school relocates, the embassy and OBO will not attempt to sell the property. The Syrian government recognizes the school as an instrumentality of the embassy. Therefore, it is the embassy, not the school, that has for the last 18 years sought permission from the Syrian government to obtain a new school site. The embassy uses all high-level visits to press the Syrian government to approve land for a new school site. To date, such requests have not been granted. The FY 2007 MPP does not address a strategy for pressing the Syrian government on this issue, although the (b)(2)(b)(6) School Board, chaired by the DCM, is actively pursuing land-acquisition opportunities.

The delays have only dampened the school's prospects for moving, as its financial resources have not kept pace with escalating property values. The school's building fund has a balance of \$8.2 million, of which \$1 million is allocated for evacuations. At current prices, the school expects to pay approximately \$3 million for land and between \$7 million and \$10 million for construction. Prospects for financing its shortfall of between \$3 million and \$6 million are viewed by school officials as not very good. The school has been raising tuitions approximately four percent a year, but still finds itself losing ground. Given this situation and the dim prospects of obtaining Syrian government approvals for a new site, the school would like a long-term lease for the site, to stabilize its rent while it searches for a new campus.

OBO has legal authority under Section 9 of the Foreign Service Buildings Act, 22 U.S.C. 300, to lease Department property and to charge and retain rents. The Department also can assist American schools at posts abroad under Section 28 of the Department's Basic Authorities Act. Furthermore, 22 U.S.C. 2701 specifically provides authority to use the Foreign Service Buildings Act to provide such assistance. Thus, the legal authority exists to permit the Department to rent property to (b)(2)(b)(6) at a rate affordable to the school.

The requiring of (b)(2)(b)(6) to pay an annual rent for the Garden Site has been vetted at the highest levels within the Department, and OBO imposed rent after much deliberation. (b)(2)(b)(6) and the post continue to argue that the rental costs jeopardize the school's prospects of moving by eroding its building fund, an argument with merit. The school's success as a beacon of American values is in the best interest of the post. A quality school will also attract bidders with families, which is important to NEA's effort to recruit and retain people with Middle Eastern expertise and Arabic skills.

Recommendation 4: Embassy Damascus, in coordination with the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations and the Office of Overseas Schools, should develop as part of its next Mission Performance Plan, strategy, tactics, and performance indicators for pressing the Syrian government to allow the to purchase a site for a new school. (Action: Embassy Damascus, in coordination with OBO and A/OPR)

Recommendation 5: The Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations, in coordination with Embassy Damascus and the Office of Overseas Schools, should establish the annual rent for the (b)(2)(b)(6)(b)(2)(b)(6) at a level the school can afford and that does not hinder the school's relocation. (Action: OBO, in coordination with Embassy Damascus and A/OPR)

The Aleppo Property

The government-owned property in Aleppo, formerly used to house a consulate, remains unsold. It has been unoccupied since 1967. In 1981, a pending sale of the property was not consummated, as required approvals of the U.S. government and the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs were not obtained. At the time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a letter to the Ministry of Justice advising that the pending sales agreement was cancelled and that the buyer be notified of the cancellation. Documentation supports the U.S. government position that lack of the required approvals prevented consummation of the sale and that ownership of the property still rests with the U.S. government.

In 2002, however, the family of the intended buyer filed a court claim insisting that the earlier negotiation had given it the sole right to purchase the property and placed a lien against the property. During OIG's inspection, the family sent a letter to the post in which it repeated its claim that it had the sole right to purchase the property and offered \$5 million Syrian Pounds, the equivalent of \$96,153.00 for it.

Post and the Department's Office of the Legal Adviser have been exploring ways to address the legal challenge. Initiating litigation in the courts of Syria to remove the lien on the U.S. government title to the Aleppo property is a possibility. Negotiating with the family to remove the lien is another. Post may elect to go to court to remove the lien or go forward and attempt to sell the property with the associated lien intact.

The price of the property of \$105,000 in 1981 is not relevant to today's market and should not be the starting point of any further negotiations. In 1997, the property almost sold for \$3,555,685. In 2001, the property was appraised at \$3 million. Current offers for the property are in the \$6 million range. It has not been appraised since 2001, but it is fair to say the Aleppo property is a valuable asset, which the Department should attempt to sell for its current market value.

Recommendation 6: The Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations, in coordination with the Office of the Legal Adviser and Embassy Damascus, should choose a negotiation and sales strategy that realizes the full value of the Aleppo property. (Action: OBO, in coordination with L and Embassy Damascus)

General Services Office Building Lease

Ownership of the leased GSO building has been disputed since 1991, making payment of rental payments problematic for the post. The post began leasing the property in 1974 but currently does not have a lease for the property. OBO is aware of this. The embassy is not a party in the legal matter. The issue of ownership of this property remains unresolved, as does the question of the rightful recipients of the rental payments. Since 1991, the embassy has followed Ministry of Foreign Affairs' often-varying advice as to whom rental payments were to be made. The embassy has obligated \$346,329, paid \$87,455 and has a balance of \$258,874 for the rental payments for six fiscal years. OBO had instructed the embassy to open an escrow account for the rental funds, but this did not happen. Now OBO advises the embassy to deobligate the money and return it to OBO and rely on receiving a new advice of allotment when payment to the registered heirs/owners is required. Post is concerned that the leasehold funds will not be available when needed and would be more comfortable keeping obligated funds at post. OIG supports the embassy, as the leasehold funds are no-year funds.

Recommendation 7: Embassy Damascus, in coordination with the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations and the Bureau of Resource Management, should implement a mechanism for paying/setting aside rental payments for the general services office building. (Action: Embassy Damascus, in coordination with OBO and RM)

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GENERAL SERVICES OPERATIONS

Some functions of GSO are working well, and others are not. The community is unhappy with its performance and cited lack of customer service, especially of the supervisory GSO. The supervisory GSO needs to be more attentive to the interpersonal side of customer service. Fire and safety issues have not received enough attention. GSO received a mixed review from embassy American employees. Motor pool, housing, customs and shipping, and attention to fire and safety issues received high marks. Others, like maintenance and repair of housing, and suitability of household furnishings, received average scores. Equity and adminis-

tration of the housing program, procurement, chancery maintenance, and overall management of general services received low scores. A new management team has made significant changes to the embassy housing program. A recently completed housing questionnaire positively reflected those changes.

The supervisory GSO and the assistant GSO share responsibilities, but the supervisory GSO has taken on most of the work, which contributes to time delays in responding to service requests. The supervisory GSO is directly responsible for facilities maintenance, housing, procurement and contracting, and travel. An eligible family member GSO assistant helps with facilities maintenance and other duties. The assistant GSO is responsible for motor pool, personal property, and customs and shipping. It is apparent that a more equitable redistribution of GSO functions between the two positions is appropriate. An informal recommendation addresses a reorganization of GSO functions.

Embassy Damascus' occupational safety and fire prevention programs, until recently, had not received the degree of attention required to ensure the safety of embassy employees. While some aspects of the occupational safety, health, and environmental management (SHEM) and fire programs are in place, others are not. According to the supervisory GSO, the post occupational safety and health officer, she is in the process of reinvigorating the SHEM and fire programs. It is imperative that the administration of the SHEM and fire programs get the highest post priority.

Recommendation 9: Embassy Damascus, in coordination with the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations, should implement an occupational safety, health, and environmental management program and a fire prevention program to protect its facilities and people. (Action: Embassy Damascus, in coordination with OBO)

During the inspection, it was noted that GSO was too involved in acquiring third party liability insurance for privately owned vehicles. GSO acts as a middleman between an insurance company and embassy American employees, collecting cash in exchange for policies. This involvement could be misconstrued as accepting full responsibility for ensuring that policies are in effect. Individuals are solely responsible for acquiring insurance with the assistance of GSO. An informal recommendation addresses this practice.

Maintenance Operations

The maintenance staff is small, lacks expertise in several critical areas, and is overly dependent on contractors. The maintenance staff consists of a supervisor, foreman, two electricians, two plumbers, and a carpenter as well as 16 laborers/custodians. It lacks air conditioning, generator, and appliance technicians as well as a work order clerk. Since the last inspection, the local guard force and janitorial contracts were allowed to lapse. Both guards and laborers/custodians are now direct hires, which adds to the maintenance workload, as does the additional American positions and added office and residential space. It handles on average between 200 and 250 work orders a month. GSO has worked to improve its work order system that admittedly had let some work orders fall through the cracks. There is no evidence of a work order backlog at this time, and tracking and feedback mechanisms are in place. GSO contracts for preventive maintenance on generators, air conditioners, household appliances, and furnaces. It also contracts for painting. Resident expertise in these areas would enable the maintenance staff to be more responsive to customer needs. Passing a work order to a contractor adds days to the time needed to complete routine work, requires maintenance staff presence at the work site, and may require follow-up trips. Consideration should be given to adding skilled positions to the maintenance office and reducing the number of laborer/custodian positions. An informal recommendation addresses a reorganization of maintenance functions.

As presently structured, GSO does not have a special projects coordinator to oversee and coordinate residential and office make-readies and construction projects. It is the supervisory GSO who coordinates this work. A special projects coordinator could perform this function and provide some relief to the supervisory GSO. An informal recommendation addresses the need to establish a position for an eligible family member special projects coordinator.

Property Office

For the most part, the property office is performing satisfactory work. However, a few exceptions were found during the inspection and are noted here to either correct the failing or to preclude it from happening again. During the inventory and reconciliation process for FY 2003, the property staff did not find property valued at \$4,388. Proper procedures call for the property to be taken off the books. Instead, the missing property was allowed to remain on the books. Subsequently, all the missing property was found.

It has been the practice of the property office to conduct closed property auctions to dispose of its excess property. Auctions were not advertised in the local newspapers. Buyers who had participated in prior auctions were invited back. This practice disadvantages the embassy's attempt to maximize proceeds from property sales and advantages a few select participants. Syrian law was cited for this practice. Apparently, according to the property office, open participation in auctions is now possible. The management officer pulled back good furniture and appliances destined to be sold at the last auction. Current replacement cycles appear to favor brisk replacements. Active participation of the Property Board of Survey and other responsible officers is required to guard against the possibility of abuse. An actively engaged Property Board of Survey is a must. A review of residential property inventories revealed that seven were unsigned by the American officer.

An inspection of the warehouse disclosed an unsafe second floor area where welcome kit material is stored and managed. One side of this area is open and not protected by a railing, and the ladder to the area is also unsafe. Finally, the Arts In Embassies crates are now stored in several locations, including the embassy residence garage. They should all be stored in the warehouse and protected from damage. An informal recommendation addresses the need to tighten procedures over property management.

Procurement Office

The procurement office is performing well in spite of the difficulties of doing business in Syria. Identifying qualified, reliable companies willing to do business and abide by procurement laws, and at the same time obtaining ample competition, is very difficult. Collusion is commonly practiced among bidders here. Damascus does not have "all purpose" hardware stores. Merchants do not generally accept purchase cards. Syria is a cash economy; checks, and to a far greater extent, electronic funds transfers are not acceptable means of payment. The procurement office will be instituting a purchase card program that will make offshore purchasing much easier. To its credit, the office instituted several blanket purchase agreements for plumbing and electrical supplies. This has reduced the maintenance shop's dependence on petty cash purchases by the procurement office. However, the services contracted for under the blanket purchase agreements for maintenance of the embassy residence swimming pool, fountain, and tennis court should be obtained through a purchase order. The terms of the blanket purchase agreement require equal monthly payments and a minimum of six hours per day, six days per

week. A purchase order should be used when the exact services and quantities are known, and the delivery requirements defined. An informal recommendation was made that the blanket purchase agreement be cancelled and a purchase order prepared for these services.

A review of the office's contract award process showed that its technical evaluations of contractor proposals do not completely adhere to Federal Acquisition Regulations 9.1 requirements. Tightening up this aspect of the contract award process is necessary, and an informal recommendation addresses this shortcoming.

Housing Office

The housing office is doing a good job of managing embassy housing as well as nonresidential leases. The housing board, supervisory GSO, RSO, safety officer, and maintenance office are all active in vetting housing considered for leasing. The embassy has been very successful in convincing landlords to install security upgrades and make safety upgrades and cosmetic improvements at no cost. Housing conforms to Department criteria, and OBO waivers are obtained for advance rental payments, leases over \$25,000, and for offshore payment when necessary. GSO has been actively pursuing better housing for several years with good results. The majority of houses in the housing pool are relatively new leases. Seventy-three percent of the leases were started between 2000 and 2005; 36 percent of the leases were entered into in the last three years (2003-05). During the inspection, a review was made of several residential units. Overall, housing was found to conform to Department guidelines. Housing board procedures and the housing assignments process have been revised and are now more transparent. Residential buildings, however, lack amenities like gyms and swimming pools. Common areas and stairways often are not well maintained.

Customs and Shipping

The Embassy Damascus customs and shipping operations are undergoing a period of transition, partly in reaction to the sanctions imposed by the SAA. Before the SAA, household effects and personal vehicles, along with official shipments, could be sent directly from the United States to Syrian ports. Following imposition of the sanctions, direct routes between the United States and Syria were stopped, and all goods must transit the Department's European Logistical Support Office (ELSO) in Antwerp, Belgium. In the past, official and personal shipments might require from three to four weeks to reach Syria; now the time has doubled to about two months.

During the summer of 2004, Embassy Damascus and ELSO experienced the full brunt of the SAA sanctions, with shipments being delayed for up to six months while ELSO personnel sought space on vessels to Syria, competing with shipments bound for Iraq. At the time of the inspection, ELSO had begun to place Embassy Damascus shipments only on vessels bound directly for Syrian ports, and embassy employees believe that, at least for the time being, shipping procedures and times have improved.

Travel

Embassy Damascus has a memorandum of understanding for the performance of travel services with a subsidiary of the General Services Administration contractor, Carlson Wagon-Lit Travel. The contractor provides an employee in the embassy for four hours a day, four days a week. In addition, the embassy employs an FSN to prepare travel orders and coordinate other travel issues.

When OIG arrived at post, Embassy Damascus personnel were contacting the FSN, not the contractor representative, for personal travel arrangements, and making payments in cash to the FSN for personal tickets. During the course of the inspection, the embassy issued a management notice reminding employees that all personal travel arrangements and payments must be made to the contractor representative, not to the FSN. OIG endorses this action.

Embassy Damascus has taken a number of steps to improve travel operations, including issuing standard procedures for airline ticketing and requiring that the traveler complete an official travel request form before requesting travel arrangements. These and other modifications of the previously loosely structured travel office practices will enhance the effectiveness of the office and save time in making arrangements for official travel.

The travel contractor is required to return to the embassy the commission paid by airlines in Syria to travel agencies. At the end of 2004, the contractor, when returning this amount, also deducted taxes that were paid to the Syrian government. Although the General Services Administration contract allows for deduction of value-added taxes, it does not allow contractors to deduct other taxes. The embassy has contacted the General Services Administration regarding this matter.

Motor Pool

The embassy motor pool is well run. Its vehicles are well maintained; driver overtime is kept to a minimum; and, the required reports are prepared.

The motor pool supervisor is out of the office on long-term sick leave and is expected to retire in the fall of 2005. In the meantime, a driver/dispatcher is running the motor pool that consists of nine ICASS and six program drivers. The absence of a full-time supervisor hinders improvements that could be made in motor pool operations. OIG encourages Embassy Damascus to fully empower the deputy motor pool supervisor to carry out the appropriate responsibilities in the absence of the motor pool supervisor.

The Syrian government allows Embassy Damascus to have 35 diplomatic license plates for official vehicles. (There is no limit on the number of plates issued for personal vehicles.) Of the 35 license plates, three are used for vehicles of the Defense attaché's office and two for DCS vehicles. The Syrian government will not issue license plates directly to DCS. The remaining 30 plates are assigned to Department vehicles.

The inability of the embassy to obtain a larger number of license plates from the Syrian government has hampered motor pool operations and has led to a number of inconsistencies in vehicle usage. OIG found that the local guard force, mobile patrol unit, and surveillance detection operations were using ICASS vehicles and that gasoline and maintenance costs for these DS activities were being charged to ICASS. In February 2005, a local guard force supervisor had an accident with the ICASS vehicle he was driving, and the embassy believes that the wrecked vehicle is too old to be worth repairing. However, a new vehicle cannot be brought into Syria until disposal arrangements are completed for the old one, and in the meantime, the RSO requested that the supervisor be assigned another ICASS vehicle. The DS mobile patrol unit uses another ICASS vehicle, putting sizable mileage and wear on it. For example, the mobile patrol personnel drove the vehicle 5,776 miles in January 2005, using 666 gallons of gasoline. The gasoline was charged to ICASS, as was vehicle maintenance.

OIG believes that ICASS funds that are badly needed for ongoing embassy activities are being spent on DS activities when DS funding should be provided and used. OIG made an informal recommendation that the embassy ICASS council review the use of ICASS vehicles and funding for post security operations, and determine whether it should make changes in the assignment of ICASS vehicles and/or in the payment for gasoline and maintenance.

Embassy Damascus operates two vehicles every weekday morning and afternoon to take children to and from DCS. The origin of this practice is not clear, but reportedly it stemmed from an Emergency Action Committee request some years ago. The provision of vehicles and drivers for school bus purposes places severe

demands on the motor pool, requires overtime on holidays when the school is operating but the embassy is not, and is being paid for by ICASS funds. Under current practices, the costs are not being reimbursed to the embassy under the Department's education allowance system. The security situation in Damascus does not currently require the use of lightly armored vehicles to transport children to and from school, and, in fact, some embassy personnel believe that the use of high profile, diplomatic vehicles for school transport makes the service more visible. There is some thought that the use of commercial vehicles for this purpose might be safer.

Embassy Damascus has contacted several potential bidders regarding the provision of school bus service for DCS. It has identified companies with well-maintained vehicles and experienced drivers. OIG believes that in order to reduce ICASS costs and relieve the motor pool from providing a service that is not truly required of it, the embassy should remove school transport from the motor pool. Advanced discussion to obtain agreement from the emergency action committee to the change is important for embassy community understanding and support.

Recommendation 10: Embassy Damascus should accept bids for providing school transport services, issue a contract for this activity, and request that the education allowance for Damascus be increased to cover the costs. (Action: Embassy Damascus)

The Embassy Damascus chancery compound includes an underground gasoline storage tank with an aboveground pump that is not now being used. At some time in the past, the embassy decided not to use the tank for security reasons, but the embassy was not able to provide the rationale or history. The motor pool purchases gasoline from a contract service located five minutes from the chancery on weekend mornings, but about 20-25 minutes away at other times. Thus, an hour is often required to fill the gas tank of a vehicle, a 20-minute drive or so in each direction, and another ten to 20 minutes in getting on and off the compound and actually purchasing the gasoline. There are a number of issues associated with the underground gasoline tank situation. OIG encourages the embassy to come to a consensus regarding use of the underground gasoline tank.

ethics policy, and a training plan for FSNs. He also established quarterly luncheons with the civilian comparators in Damascus as a forum for dialogue on labor practices affecting LE staff.

The computer aided job evaluation (CAJE) program was completed in September 2004. The CAJE project provided an 11.76 percent increase in pay grades for the FSN community, mostly due to the submission of new position descriptions. However, some positions require reevaluation. Since October 2004, Embassy Damascus has requested assistance from NEA and the Bureau of Human Resources, Office of Overseas Employment, for an independent party to reevaluate some CAJE positions. Neither bureau has sent anyone to assist Embassy Damascus. Embassy Damascus has actively sought a when-actually-employed individual for assistance and took the initiative in planning to exchange HR officers with Amman, Jordan, to reevaluate the positions. This exchange will not occur until June 2005 at the earliest. Less than ten positions require a review, but until these positions are put into the CAJE system, Embassy Damascus will not be 100 percent certified for CAJE implementation.

Recommendation 11: The Bureau of Human Resources, in coordination with the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, should provide immediate assistance to Embassy Damascus to reevaluate computer aided job evaluation classifications of positions identified by the post. (Action: DGHR, in coordination with NEA)

Training plans for LE staff are reflected in an embassy-wide LE staff training plan that was updated in November 2004. Cross training is practiced in the HR section, but more cross training would allow these employees to enhance their knowledge of Department personnel regulations and guidelines. Although both the HR supervisor and one FSN are trained in CAJE, training another staff person would provide more flexibility in the future. Prior to the arrival of the HR officer, many of the position description evaluations were conducted by the lead FSN HR specialist. This undertaking was a burdensome workload, and did not provide a balance of management controls. OIG made an informal recommendation that Embassy Damascus train another HR section staff member in CAJE procedures.

The FSN leadership committee is active at Embassy Damascus. The committee has elected officers, representatives from all sections, who serve a three-year term. It is an effective group that has promoted positive change. Communication on LE staff issues is strong, with the committee being able to meet with the Ambassador, DCM, or management officer.

LE staff commented that they are satisfied with their benefits, including the local compensation plan. HR reviews the plan annually. The plan encompasses several allowances comparable to prevailing practice, including transportation, meal/beverage, and miscellaneous benefit allowances. In July 2004, the Syrian government decreed a nationwide salary increase. The Department's Office of Overseas Employment endorsed this increase for the embassy in September 2004. Implementing the increase resulted in an average increase of five percent for regular scale employees and an 11 percent increase for guards and laborers.

The FSN leadership committee expressed disappointment with communication between FSN supervisors and subordinates. This issue is raised in the EEO section of the report.

Entry-level officers would welcome more structure and substance in the post mentoring program. Many felt that there were no standard operating procedures or formal guidelines to learn key elements of their duties. They also felt that more visits to their sections by the chargé would be beneficial. Entry-level officers began their own newsletter addressing issues having to do with career development, etc. The chargé has sought to create more structure in his mentoring by establishing monthly sessions with entry-level officers to augment his ad hoc efforts. He also initiated brown bag lunches with embassy officers to discuss pending issues. Embassy management should focus more keenly on mentoring and develop a plan to improve and create greater structure in its mentoring and training opportunities for entry-level officers.

Recommendation 12: Embassy Damascus should design and implement a structured entry-level officers mentoring program. (Action: Embassy Damascus)

Post Language Program

Embassy Damascus has an active post language program managed by an entry-level consular officer. Although the program runs smoothly, the officer indicated that due to her responsibilities it is difficult to further strengthen the post language program. Embassy Damascus requested an FSN position in the FY 2007 MPP for a post language administrator; alternatively, this position could be created as an eligible family member position. OIG supports this request. The Foreign Service Institute supplied post with \$29,000 to augment the program for FY 2005. This funding will be used for language instruction.

Presently, American staff can schedule group classes twice a week for Arabic training with a dedicated instructor. This schedule works most of the time but is sometimes inhibited by workload and other office priorities. Embassy Damascus schedules language excursions to the local market or coffee houses for employees to practice their Arabic without interruption. Syrian idioms that are used more frequently in day-to-day activities can be provided during language instruction.

Language training prior to arrival at post could be stronger. Entry-level officers indicated that some of them only received six months of Arabic language training as opposed to the nine months of language training that the Foreign Service Institute recommends. For example, NIV interviewing officers conduct most of their interviews in Arabic without the aid of an FSN interpreter. However, the ability to conduct a more in-depth interview, that may be necessary for homeland security issues, is limited. The same is applicable to the public affairs and political/economic officers who need Arabic to maintain and to expand contacts in nongovernmental organizations, human rights, and in civil society areas. Some officers stated that the language training they received failed to prepare them for the idiomatic Arabic that is spoken in Syria. The Foreign Service Institute, in partnership with NEA and the post, is exploring ways to extend officers' length of language training through short-term internships and workshops in-country and elsewhere to ensure they acquire the necessary higher level Arabic language skills.

Recommendation 13: The Bureau of Human Resources, in coordination with Embassy Damascus and the Foreign Service Institute, should implement procedures to ensure that prior to arrival at post, officers receive language training appropriate to their work. (Action: DGHR, in coordination with FSI and Embassy Damascus)

Awards Program

A review of awards files showed a tendency for the same FSNs to receive awards periodically. A majority of the awards are provided to the FSN community, but Embassy Damascus offers very few awards to American officers. Awards were granted several times a year until the recent implementation of a new awards policy. Under this policy and 3 FAM 4800, embassy personnel are reminded that awards are given to those individuals who merit special recognition. The policy also states that employees will be approved for a maximum of one award a year, unless they have performed above and beyond the most extraordinary circumstances that warrant additional recognition.

Orientation Program

As a result of receiving low scores on the workplace and quality of life questionnaires, Embassy Damascus has taken steps to enhance the orientation program. Embassy Damascus has a comprehensive orientation program that involves all embassy sections. This program is provided twice a year to new arrivals. Many staff members gave praise to the program because they found it to be very helpful and a good way to get acclimated to post. Embassy Damascus hosts a formal orientation program for new arrivals where both Foreign Service officers and their families are invited to attend. At the end of the initial orientation, the Ambassador sponsors an informal event at the residence for the new employees to get acquainted with colleagues. At the end of orientation week, the CLO coordinator organizes a walking tour of the market and Old Damascus.

Equal Employment Opportunity

Embassy Damascus employees are familiar with EEO policies and procedures. An EEO counselor and secondary counselor were appointed in 2005, but the primary EEO counselor has not received the required EEO training and will be taking the course on-line. To promote better understanding, Embassy Damascus held a mandatory half-day EEO seminar in FY 2004 to discuss such issues as sexual harassment and to explain how the EEO process works. This seminar was translated in Arabic for participants and is scheduled again for FY 2005.

One issue that was brought to OIG's attention is the hierarchical disparity between FSN supervisors and their subordinates. OIG advised Embassy Damascus to incorporate cultural awareness training into EEO training to make both American and FSN employees more aware of this issue. Embassy Damascus will hold this cultural awareness training again in late FY 2005, and will include teambuilding in conjunction with EEO sexual harassment training.

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND INFORMATION SECURITY

Embassy Damascus has a good information management program to support approximately 215 authorized users. Information technology, telecommunications, and Internet services were rated highly in OIG's management operations question-

naire. OIG, however, found some areas requiring management attention, such as an inadequate telephone system, inappropriate use of the unclassified diplomatic pouch and mail service, inaccurate patch management reports, and the lack of a trained alternate information systems security officer. OIG also reviewed the information programs center (IPC), and the results are reported in the companion classified inspection report. OIG made an informal recommendation that the embassy label the power distribution panel in the information services center.

Information Management

The Embassy Damascus information systems staff consists of an information management officer who oversees the embassy information management operations, including the information services center unclassified activities and the IPC classified activities. An information systems officer manages the unclassified information systems and supervises four LE staff system administrators. An information programs officer manages the IPC, including the classified network, the Overseas Wireless Program, unclassified and classified diplomatic pouch services, and telephone operations, and supervises two direct-hire information management specialists. Five LE staff support the IPC activities: three employees in the unclassified mail and pouch room, one telephone operator, and one receptionist.

Embassy Damascus regularly implements new Department programs. The embassy has implemented the local change control board and installed network intrusion detection systems to protect information resource assets. The embassy also has documented standard operational procedures for the unclassified and classified information operations, documented security and contingency plans for its unclassified and classified information systems, established a memorandum of understanding for offsite storage of its unclassified and classified backup tapes, and briefed individuals on their records management responsibilities related to electronic mail. The embassy has up-to-date web sites, and its operating systems are compliant with the Department security standards. Embassy Damascus' information management staff members are well trained; many hold industry certifications. All Damascus information management employees have gone to extensive Department information management training.

In December 2002, to eliminate duplicate computer networks, Embassy Damascus completed an initiative to integrate the public diplomacy network into the Department's OpenNet Plus network. However, Embassy Damascus also operates an overseas dedicated Internet local area network at a cost of \$11,000 per year. A waiver request has been submitted for the Internet connection.

QUALITY OF LIFE

Community Liaison Activities

Although the CLO coordinator at Embassy Damascus runs an active program, the embassy community is divided on whether the program meets the needs of all families. Respondents to OIG's questionnaires ranked the CLO program in the middle of those embassy programs OIG assessed, and OIG received written and oral complaints that the CLO activities were not designed for all of the community. The embassy recently instituted a CLO advisory committee, and this board should help the coordinator determine programs to meet as many of the community's needs as practicable.

Hostilities in Iraq, a draw down of embassy personnel in 2003, and the uncertain relations between the U.S. government and the Syrian government all affect the morale of American employees and family members in Damascus. In addition, the lack of sufficient office space on the compound, problems in the operation of the commissary (see the section of the employee association) that led to its temporary closure, and past perceived inequities in the housing program are issues that are detrimental to morale. The arrival of a new management counselor in the summer of 2004, along with a sizable turnover in personnel and the arrival of individuals with fresh outlooks, have been instrumental in raising morale and generating a higher sense of well being.

Health Unit

The health unit is located in the public diplomacy building about a block from the chancery compound and provides suitable care for the embassy. The nurse works 25 hours a week and sees an average of four patients per day. Her contacts with patients include telephone calls and visits for illnesses, vaccinations, and health promotion. The nurse also reviews health examination results for FSN job applicants and performs biannual health checkups for the embassy drivers. The health unit practices conform to Department guidance regarding eligible patients, and medications, and controlled substances are adequately secured. If the nurse

believes a person may need attention, she proactively invites them into the health unit.

The regional medical officer from Embassy Amman visits Damascus approximately four times a year and has been responsive when the embassy has requested visits. In response to requests from the embassy, the regional medical officer lectured students at DCS on topics related to drugs, safe sex, and drinking. These talks were well received, and the embassy will ask the regional medical officer to present additional lectures to younger students and parents on his next visit.

The regional psychiatrist, who is stationed in Cairo, has visited the embassy only once in the last year, although the embassy said that it would benefit from more frequent regular visits. OIG made an informal recommendation that the embassy request the Office of Medical Services arrange additional visits on a more regular schedule by the regional psychiatrist.

Embassy Damascus plans to hire a part time, back-up nurse to provide clinical services when the present nurse is away from the office on official travel or leave. There is also a second clinical nurse position, formerly occupied by a family member registered nurse, that is currently vacant. OIG believes that with an average of only four patients per day, the embassy does not require a second clinical nurse.

(b)(2)(b)(6)(b)(2)(b)(6)

The ^{(b)(2)(b)(6)}_{(b)(2)(b)(6)} is an independent day school, which offers an American educational program from preschool to grade 12 for students of all nationalities. It was founded originally through U.S. embassy actions. It is located on U.S. government property, and the Syrian government considers it an embassy entity. Of its ^{(b)(2)(b)(6)}_{(b)(2)(b)(6)} (b)(2)(b)(6)(b)(2)(b)(6)(b)(2)(b)(6)(b)(2)(b)(6)(b)(2)(b)(6) The ^{(b)(2)(b)(6)}_{(b)(2)(b)(6)} chairs the nine-person school board, and several officers are full board members or serve on committees. The Parent Teachers Association is active. School-embassy relations are excellent.

The Office of Overseas Schools regional education officer regularly visits and evaluates the school and last filed a report on February 3-6, 2004. OIG interviewed the director and toured the school. The director is seeking to keep current with academic innovations and curriculum development and has been able to retain quality faculty through modest pay raises. With board encouragement, he is increasingly addressing sex and drug education. The Amman regional medical officer has led sex education discussions and is planning on doing more. Discussion of security issues is found in a separate classified report.

OIG found the facilities clean and well maintained, if not modern. Some older buildings were clearly in need of renovation or replacement. There is no gym. The school had planned major capital improvements such as the replacement of older classrooms but has not carried out these plans because of uncertainties surrounding the possible move and the heavy burden of OBO's escalating rent charges. It is carrying out less expensive work, such as painting classrooms and resurfacing the basketball court.

OIG strongly emphasizes the great importance the ^{(b)(2)(b)(6)}_{(b)(2)(b)(6)} holds for NEA and its efforts to fill embassies in the Middle East with appropriate officers. Approximately 300 of NEA's 800 personnel slots are unaccompanied positions. This very high percentage of unaccompanied positions makes this family-friendly post more critical as NEA builds and seeks to retain a cadre of officers with NEA area expertise.

Damascus will be unable to attract accompanied officers if there is no school with an American curriculum, but the Department is not helping to protect the long term viability of Damascus' only such institution - **(b)(2)(b)(6)**
^{(b)(2)(b)(6)}_{(b)(2)(b)(6)} Its struggle to maintain standards so far has been successful, but OBO's collection of the high level of rent threatens its capacity to maintain academic standards, its ability to attract a student base, and ultimately its financial survival. OIG made a formal recommendation that the Embassy Damascus and OBO

establish an affordable rent level for the DCS property.

MANAGEMENT CONTROLS

The Ambassador, DCM, and management officer are active in promoting the principles of good management controls. The annual Chief of Mission certification, forwarded to the Department on June 4, 2004, provided a summary of identified post management control vulnerabilities. The post also identified a number of vulnerabilities when it answered the Department's Risk Assessment Questionnaire for Embassies. To its credit, post has addressed both sets of vulnerabilities and remedied many. The management officer is the post's designated management controls officer.

The American Embassy Employee Association (AEEA) is chartered to provide a convenience store, video club, snack bar, and sale of postage stamps, but the financial management office does not oversee the operation. While AEEA provides highly valued services to the embassy, its operations are not in conformance with Department requirements as discussed below. The new chairman of the AEEA board of directors has just reopened the convenience store and is in the process of attempting to sort out prior year financial statements and reports. This task has been made difficult due to missing records and possible financial mismanagement. AEEA has been delinquent in its submissions of required financial reports to the Office of Commissary and Recreation Affairs. It is clear that AEEA's financial records are not maintained in accordance with generally accepted U.S. accounting principles as called for in 6 FAM 531. Positive changes have been made in the management of AEEA, but more is required. The embassy is working with an accounting firm tasked with preparing an audit report. The AEEA board of directors has stopped cash payments to the AEEA manager/cashier and the practice of allowing her to shop at the store. The AEEA balance sheet does not show as a long-term liability \$65,000 billed by the Air Mobility Command, a third party shipping company for the Defense Commissary Agency for military transport of consumables from Germany in 2004. AEEA was disputing the bill. The Office of Commissary and Recreation Affairs contacted the Air Mobility Command in November 2004 to request supporting documentation in order to research the billing. As a result, the Office of Commissary and Recreation Affairs informed post's management officer that the billing was accurate based on correspondence between the parties and directed AEEA to negotiate a settlement and/or payment

plan with the vendor.

Recommendation 16: Embassy Damascus should implement procedures to bring operations of the American Embassy Employee Association into compliance with Department regulations. (Action: Embassy Damascus, in coordination with A/OPR)

FORMAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: The Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, in coordination with the Bureau of Consular Affairs and the Office of Rightsizing, should approve the embassy's rightsizing proposal in the cable 05 Damascus 816, to consolidate two entry-level-officer economic/consular rotational positions into a single FS-03 economic/commercial position. (Action: NEA, in coordination with CA and M/R)

Recommendation 2: The Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs should seek additional funds or review its budget priorities among posts in order to increase Embassy Damascus' public diplomacy base allotment to allow the embassy to address local programming options more effectively through more of its own discretionary grants. (Action: NEA)

Recommendation 3: The Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, in coordination with the Office of the Legal Adviser, should seek agreement to permit use of Middle East Partnership Initiative funding so that Embassy Damascus may support democratic reform and social justice programs. (Action: NEA, in coordination with L)

Recommendation 4: Embassy Damascus, in coordination with the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations and the Office of Overseas Schools, should develop as part of its next Mission Performance Plan, strategy, tactics, and performance indicators for pressing the Syrian government to allow the (b)(2)(b)(6) (b)(2)(b)(6) to purchase a site for a new school. (Action: Embassy Damascus, in coordination with OBO and A/OPR)

Recommendation 5: The Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations, in coordination with Embassy Damascus and the Office of Overseas Schools, should establish the annual rent for the (b)(2)(b)(6)(b)(2)(b)(6) at a level the school can afford and that does not hinder its relocation. (Action: OBO, in coordination with Embassy Damascus and A/OPR)

Recommendation 6: The Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations, in coordination with the Office of the Legal Adviser and Embassy Damascus, should choose a negotiation and sales strategy that realizes the full value of the Aleppo property. (Action: OBO, in coordination with L and Embassy Damascus)

Recommendation 7: Embassy Damascus, in coordination with the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations and the Bureau of Resource Management, should implement a mechanism for paying/setting aside rental payments for the general services office building. (Action: Embassy Damascus, in coordination with OBO and RM)

Recommendation 8:

Recommendation 9: Embassy Damascus, in coordination with the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations, should implement an occupational safety, health, and environmental management program and a fire prevention program to protect its facilities and people. (Action: Embassy Damascus, in coordination with OBO)

Recommendation 10: Embassy Damascus should accept bids for providing school transport services, issue a contract for this activity, and request that the education allowance for Damascus be increased to cover the costs. (Action: Embassy Damascus)

Recommendation 11: The Bureau of Human Resources, in coordination with the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, should provide immediate assistance to Embassy Damascus to reevaluate computer aided job evaluation classifications of positions identified by the post. (Action: DGHR, in coordination with NEA)

Recommendation 12: Embassy Damascus should design and implement a structured entry-level officers mentoring program. (Action: Embassy Damascus)

Recommendation 13: The Bureau of Human Resources, in coordination with Embassy Damascus and the Foreign Service Institute, should implement procedures to ensure that prior to arrival at post, officers receive language training appropriate to their work. (Action: DGHR, in coordination with FSI and Embassy Damascus)

Recommendation 14: Embassy Damascus should provide training to the alternate information systems security officer or appoint an individual who has already received the required training. (Action: Embassy Damascus)

Recommendation 15: Embassy Damascus should document the findings from reviews by the information management section of randomly selected user libraries, audit logs, and user and systems operational practices. (Action: Embassy Damascus)

Recommendation 16: Embassy Damascus should implement procedures to bring operations of the American Embassy Employee Association into compliance with Department regulations. (Action: Embassy Damascus, in coordination with A/OPR)

INFORMAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Informal recommendations cover operational matters not requiring action by organizations outside the inspected unit and/or the parent regional bureau. Informal recommendations will not be subject to the OIG compliance process. However, any subsequent OIG inspection or on-site compliance review will assess the mission's progress in implementing the informal recommendations.

Public Diplomacy

PAS has not maintained the library book collection due to inadequate budgets, and its nonfiction works are obsolete. The embassy is planning to expand into the library space. A modest reading room for MPP-related periodicals, the fiction collection, and American novels written in special English versions would allow the PAS to maintain face-to-face contact with American studies audiences and researchers.

Informal Recommendation 1: Embassy Damascus should maintain a modest reading room in the public diplomacy annex for Mission Performance Plan-related periodicals, the fiction collection, and special English versions of American novels.

AMIDEAST would like to open a branch in Aleppo for English-teaching and educational advising services.

Informal Recommendation 2: The Department should support America-Mideast Educational and Training Services, Inc.'s establishment of a branch of the American Language Center in Aleppo through mission diplomatic activity, if not financial support.

Consular Operations

Embassy Beirut resumed IV services in November 2004. Prior to that, Embassy Damascus handled all Lebanese IV cases. Embassy Damascus still processes Lebanese IV cases that were filed prior to the resumption of services in Beirut. The files take up precious space in the consular section, and closing old cases is time consuming. The National Visa Center helps some embassies, including Embassy Beirut, with the processing of IV cases.

Informal Recommendation 3: Embassy Damascus should contact the Bureau of Consular Affairs and the National Visa Center for assistance with the processing of their Lebanese immigrant visa cases and transferring old immigrant visa files to the center.

Limited contact with Syrian government officials constrains the consular section's ability to plan for disasters, such as airplane crashes, but more progress is possible. The section has not followed the guidance in the Disaster Assistance Handbook and taken a more structured approach to disaster planning. Nor has it made persistent efforts to convince Syrian government officials that cooperation in this area is in their interest. The section also lacks thorough knowledge about how the Syrian government would handle such a crisis, including who would do DNA testing.

Informal Recommendation 4: Embassy Damascus should follow more closely the Disaster Assistance Handbook guidance on preparing for disasters, such as airplane crashes. The embassy should develop a better understanding of how the host country government would handle such crises.

The consular section has a space for storing the personal effects of deceased American citizens. However, it is not accessible only to the accountable officer.

Informal Recommendation 5: The embassy should have a space for storage of the personal effects of deceased American citizens that is accessible only to the accountable officer.

The consular section is revitalizing its FPU. The border security and technology transfer components of the FPU's work are of utmost importance and require a smooth flow of information from all sections of the embassy to the consular section. The FPU also plays a role in briefing new visa officers about local conditions.

Informal Recommendation 6: The embassy should designate the consular section's fraud prevention officer as the person responsible for compiling and analyzing information from other sections of the embassy on counterterrorism, crime, and technology transfer as it relates to consular work.

The Syrian government controls the local media, but there are other opportunities for the use of public diplomacy to promote consular goals, such as encouraging more students to study in the United States, warning the public about visa fraud, and promoting the use of the electronic visa application. The Embassy Damascus public affairs office can assist the consular section in identifying these opportunities.

Informal Recommendation 7: Embassy Damascus should have the consular section chief and the public affairs officer meet periodically to discuss the use of public diplomacy to promote consular goals.

General Services Operations

The GSO functions are not equitably distributed between the supervisory GSO and the assistant GSO. The supervisory GSO has most of the work as well as overall responsibility for GSO, and this has contributed to time delays.

Informal Recommendation 8: Embassy Damascus should reorganize the general services office to distribute better the work between the supervisory general services officer and assistant general services officer.

GSO acts as a middleman between an insurance company and American employees by collecting cash in exchange for third party liability insurance. Individuals are responsible for acquiring their own insurance. GSO may assist.

Informal Recommendation 9: Embassy Damascus should facilitate, but not execute, the purchase of third party liability insurance for their privately owned vehicles.

GSO's maintenance staff lacks several skilled positions generally found at other posts like air conditioning, generator, and appliance technicians and is overly dependent on contractors.

Informal Recommendation 10: Embassy Damascus should review the need for specific skills in the maintenance unit and add positions to meet the needs identified.

GSO's property office chose not to write off property not found during the FY 2003 inventory, conducted a closed auction in FY 2005, and did not get several officers to sign their residential inventories.

Informal Recommendation 11: Embassy Damascus should ensure that the property office follows proper property control procedures.

GSO is improperly using a blanket purchase agreement to acquire services for the embassy residence swimming pool, fountain, and tennis courts.

Informal Recommendation 12: Embassy Damascus should use a purchase order to acquire pool, fountain, and tennis court services at the Ambassador's residence.

ICASS funds are being spent on DS activities when DS funding should be provided and used. The local guard force, mobile patrol unit, and surveillance detection operations are using ICASS vehicles and charging gasoline and maintenance costs for these DS activities to ICASS. The DS mobile patrol unit uses an ICASS vehicle, putting sizable mileage and wear on it. For example, the mobile patrol personnel drove the vehicle 5,776 miles in January 2005, using 666 gallons of gasoline. The gasoline was charged to ICASS, as was vehicle maintenance.

Informal Recommendation 13: Embassy Damascus should review the use of International Cooperative Administrative Support Services vehicles and funding for post security operations and determine whether to make changes in the assignment of vehicles and/or in the payment for gasoline and maintenance.

Human Resources

Embassy Damascus has only one staff member trained in CAJE procedures. This creates a difficult workload and does not provide management balance.

Informal Recommendation 14: Embassy Damascus should provide computer aided job evaluation training to another staff member in the human resources section.

Information Technology Issues

Embassy Damascus has not labeled the power distribution panel in the information services center as required by 12 FAM 629.4-3.

Informal Recommendation 15: Embassy Damascus should label the power distribution panel in the information services center as required by Department regulations.

Health Unit Issues

The regional psychiatrist who is stationed in Cairo has visited the embassy only once in the last year, although the embassy said that it would benefit from more frequent regular visits.

Informal Recommendation 16: Embassy Damascus should request the Office of Medical Services establish a regular, more frequent schedule of visits by the regional psychiatrist.

PRINCIPAL OFFICIALS

	Name	Arrival Date
Ambassador	Margaret Scobey	12/03
Deputy Chief of Mission	Stephen A. Seche	09/04
Chiefs of Sections:		
Management	Kathy Johnson-Casares	08/04
Consular	Steven C. Koutsis	06/02
Political	William V. Roebuck	01/04
Economic	Stephen O'Dowd	08/02
Public Diplomacy	Arthur C. Eccel	09/03
Regional Security	Michael M. Mack	08/03
Other Agencies:		
Department of Defense	David G. Jesmer	08/03

ABBREVIATIONS

ACCESS	ACCESS (English-language) microscholarship program
AEEA	American Embassy Employee Association
AMIDEAST	America-Mideast Educational and Training Services, Inc.
CAJE	Computer aided job evaluation
CLO	Community liaison office
DCM	Deputy chief of mission
DCS	Damascus Community School
Department	Department of State
DS	Bureau of Diplomatic Security
ECA	Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
EEO	Equal Employment Opportunity
ELSO	European Logistical Support Office
FPU	Fraud prevention unit
FSN	Foreign Service national
GSO	General services office(r)
HR	Human resources
ICASS	International Cooperative Administrative Support Services
IPC	Information processing center
ISSO	Information systems security office(r)
IV	Immigrant visa
LE	Locally employed
MEPI	Middle East Partnership Initiative
MPP	Mission Performance Plan

NEA	Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs
NEC	New embassy compound
NIV	Nonimmigrant visa
OBO	Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations
OIG	Office of Inspector General
OMS	Office management specialist
PAO	Public affairs officer
PAS	Public affairs section
RSO	Regional security officer
SAA	Syrian Accountability and Restoration of Lebanese Sovereignty Act
SHEM	Safety/health and environmental management
UNSCR	U.N. Security Council Resolution