

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-107077](#), a report to the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

The United States is the world's largest provider of defense articles to other nations. State and DOD have jointly approved over \$100 billion in transfers annually. Public reports have raised concerns that recipients may be using U.S. defense articles in activities that violate human rights.

House Report 118-125 includes a provision for GAO to review laws and policies related to transfers of defense articles and human rights as well as efforts to conduct monitoring of potential human rights violations involving U.S. defense articles. This report examines (1) laws and policies related to human rights and the transfer or use of U.S. defense articles and (2) the extent to which agencies mitigate and respond to the risk that U.S. defense articles may be involved in human rights violations.

GAO analyzed relevant laws, policies, guidance, and State and DOD information on monitoring and civilian harm response processes. GAO also interviewed agency officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that State develop (1) a mechanism to incorporate external parties' allegations of civilian harm into its response process and (2) a strategy to identify appropriate staffing and resources for its process. State said considering external allegations would be impractical but that it would identify appropriate staffing and resources for its process.

View [GAO-25-107077](#). For more information, contact Chelsa Kenney at [kenneyc@gao.gov](mailto:kenneyc@gao.gov).

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## HUMAN RIGHTS

### State Can Improve Response to Allegations of Civilians Harmed by U.S. Arms Transfers

## What GAO Found

The Departments of State and Defense (DOD) are the primary U.S. agencies responsible for managing the sale or transfer of U.S. defense articles, such as weapons and equipment. The transfer of these articles to other countries is governed by laws and policies, including human rights requirements. U.S. law generally prohibits assistance to any country where the government consistently violates internationally recognized human rights. In 2023, the Biden administration updated its arms transfer policy to place a greater emphasis on human rights and require U.S. agencies to conduct "appropriate monitoring" to ensure arms are used responsibly. In 2024, the Biden administration required State to obtain additional assurances from recipients that they will respect human rights obligations. State did not pause any arms transfers as a result of these updated policies.

Agency processes do not fully address the risk that recipients may use transferred U.S. defense articles to commit human rights abuses. Existing agency processes, such as vetting recipients and verifying custody of transferred defense articles, address aspects of this risk. Since 2023, State and DOD have also developed processes to respond to reports of civilian harm—including human rights abuses—involving U.S. defense articles. In response to a GAO recommendation, State developed a process called the Civilian Harm Incident Response Guidance, but it does not allow reports from non-U.S. government parties. For example, State received 617 civilian harm reports from August 2023 to December 2024. However, non-U.S. government parties such as the United Nations have identified thousands of civilian harm incidents resulting from the Israel-Hamas conflict alone. Incorporating external reports into its response process would give State a fuller picture of the scope of civilian harm incidents. Further, as of December 2024, State had not completed any investigations into reports it deemed credible. State officials said they needed additional resources to manage this workload. By developing and implementing a strategy to identify appropriate staffing and resources for the process, State could investigate the full scope of reported incidents in a more timely manner.

#### U.S. Defense Articles Delivered to Israel in October 2023



Source: U.S. Air Force/Senior Airman E. Grimaldo. | GAO-25-107077