

The State Department's Role in Countering Violent Extremism

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PREPARED REMARKS

It is a great pleasure for me to speak to you today, as part of The Washington Institute's counterterrorism lecture series.

Over the years, I have followed the Institute's work on the Middle East, while serving both in Washington as well as in such places as Tunisia, Cairo, Tel Aviv, and Kuwait. But today, we're here to talk about a relatively new project—what the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications is doing to identify, confront, and undermine the communications of al-Qa'ida and its affiliates.

I'm going to try to be brief because I want to include two of my colleagues in a more informal discussion after my remarks. They are Dan Sreebny, a distinguished veteran State Department Public Diplomacy officer who serves as Deputy Coordinator for Plans and Operations, and Daniel Kimmage, who serves CSCC as Group Director for Digital Presence and is one of the country's foremost authorities on al-Qa'ida communications.

Let me start with the basics of What, Why, and How. *What* is the mission of the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (or CSCC)? *Why* was it created? And *how* do we carry out our mission?

The Executive Order signed by President Obama in early September can be seen as a mission statement. It says:

The Center...shall coordinate, orient, and inform Government-wide public communications activities directed at audiences abroad and targeted against violent extremists and terrorist organizations, especially al-Qa'ida and its affiliates and adherents, with the goal of using communication tools to reduce radicalization by terrorists and extremist violence and terrorism that threaten the interests and national security of the United States.

Executive Order 13584 goes into some detail about the work of the Center, but I'll paraphrase key elements. CSCC is designed to:

- Draw from the Intelligence Community and other subject matter experts to identify current and emerging trends in al-Qa'ida and other extremist communications, and to request additional data collection and analysis to fill knowledge gaps;
- Develop U.S. strategic counterterrorism (CT) narratives and public communications strategies to confront and discredit the extremist messages;

■ *These remarks reflect only the portion of the forum that was on the record.*



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- Provide these CT narratives to U.S. Government communicators to rebut and preempt extremist messaging and narratives when communicating to audiences outside the United States;
- Facilitate the use of a wide range of communications technologies, including digital tools, by sharing expertise among agencies, seeking expertise from external sources, and extending best practices; and
- Identify shortfalls in U.S. capabilities in any areas relevant to the Center’s mission and recommend necessary enhancements or changes.

Why was CSCC created? The answer contains three basic premises:

1. As our National Strategy for Counterterrorism states, “The pre-eminent security threat to the United States continues to be from al-Qa’ida and its affiliates and adherents.”
2. The same strategy notes, “The 21st-century venue for sharing information and ideas is global, and al-Qa’ida, its affiliates and its adherents attempt to leverage the worldwide reach of media and communications systems to their advantage.”
3. And we were created because the President and other senior leaders recognized that there were gaps in the way we confront and counter al-Qa’ida and its affiliates and adherents in public communication spaces.

We can destroy terrorist leadership, disrupt terrorist networks, and eliminate terrorist safe havens, but unless we prevent al-Qa’ida (and here it’s important to emphasize AQ’s affiliates as well) from recruiting new members locally and expanding its reach globally, we will not be truly successful. The CSCC was created and is working hard to demonstrably reduce the effectiveness of terrorist propaganda, thus leading to fewer recruits.

Why did these gaps in our communications exist? Perhaps some believed the U.S. Government agencies could not be a credible voice in opposition to al-Qa’ida. Perhaps some felt our participation in the debate would simply enhance al-Qa’ida’s visibility and notoriety. Others thought responding would elevate AQ’s status. And there was a lack of focused, coordinated, and sustained effort across government. But whatever the reasons, al-Qa’ida was active in overt communications, and we were often absent. We too frequently ceded the communications space to them without a fight.

Senior officials in this Administration deemed that unacceptable. They recognized that a strategic approach to countering violent extremism (CVE) required a strong and fully integrated communications pillar. They decided a new unit was needed that could bring together our government’s capabilities to understand, identify, and act to weaken and pre-emptively undercut the public communications of al-Qa’ida, its affiliates, and its adherents. The result was CSCC.

The Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications started in late September 2010, when I somewhat reluctantly returned to Washington after twelve years posted abroad and was told, “This is your mission, here is some modest funding—now figure out how to do it.” So let me now talk about this—how we are carrying out this mission.

To start, we are an interagency operation. We are housed in the

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Department of State, and I report to the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, with a strong dotted-line connection to State's Coordinator for Counterterrorism. But we are a unit that reflects a whole-of-government approach to our challenges and our work. CSCC operates under the policy direction of the White House and interagency leadership. This approach is reflected in an interagency steering committee, but even more so in our staff, which brings together officers from the State Department, the Intelligence Community, and the Department of Defense and draws on their individual talents as well as the strengths of their home agencies. And while our target audiences are overseas, CSCC also liaises with agencies with domestic responsibilities to ensure coordination and consistency of message.

We also start with the concept that our communications operations will be most effective if they are based on the best, most current information and analysis. This is a commitment that is built into our basic structure. CSCC has two major organizational components: one for integrated analysis and a unit for plans and operations. Our integrated analysis shop, led by a senior intelligence officer, again reaches across our government, particularly throughout the Intelligence Community, as well as drawing from outside experts.

CSCC's work begins at the crossroads of American public diplomacy and American CVE endeavors. We use public diplomacy's communication tools, and our messages and videos are attributed to the Department of State. But we are reaching out to a specific, narrowly defined overseas audience: People who are sympathetic to the views of al-Qa'ida and could be vulnerable to its propaganda; people who could be persuaded or enticed into crossing the boundary between sympathy and action, until they pick up a gun or strap on a bomb or directly facilitate an attack. When they reach that point of mobilization, they are beyond CSCC's scope. They have made themselves targets for law enforcement and intelligence services.

So, our objectives are as narrowly focused as our audience. While I would like these individuals to also develop positive perceptions of the United States, to support our policies and appreciate our values, that is not the mission of our Center. Our job is to nudge people into a different path; help them question some of their assumptions; and contribute to an environment in which terrorist violence is not considered a viable, acceptable, or effective option.

If our efforts dissuade our audience from turning to violence or actively supporting those who do, then we have been successful in handling the task given to us. The concept is simple, but the associated tasks are not.

As for our operations, they fall along three main lines of activity:

1. **Direct digital engagement.** Our digital outreach challenges extremist messages online in Arabic, Urdu, and Somali through participation on forums, blogs, media, and social-networking sites. It also produces and disseminates targeted, attributed videos to undermine al-Qa'ida's propaganda and narrative. (Daniel Kimmage will expand on these efforts.)
2. **Providing tools to U.S. government communicators** working with foreign audiences: These include CVE communications templates and toolkits, with guidance on al-Qa'ida-related activities and issues, that are accessible to all U.S. government officials; development of a CVE online

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community to draw together CVE-related content; research and analysis to codify al-Qa'ida master narratives; creation of a Resilient Communities grants initiative to commemorate the strength and resilience of communities around the world in response to terrorist attacks; and sponsoring seminars in which academic and other experts share relevant knowledge with government practitioners.

3. **Working with specific U.S. missions abroad** to strengthen their CVE communications strategies, capabilities, and activities. In our first year of operation, we focused on working with two missions. We recently launched an initiative to work with more posts in key countries.

Our work is also coordinated with work by the Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism and other agencies to develop programs that address the upstream factors of radicalization in communities particularly susceptible to terrorist recruitment overseas.

What have we learned in our first year? We know a lot about the communications strategy and practices of “AQ central,” but we need to develop equally deep knowledge of the affiliates and we need to continue to innovate and experiment on approaches that work best for our objectives. But we have also learned that the U.S. Government *can* make a difference through such efforts; that we *can* be a voice that is heard and noticed; and that CSCC *can* play an integral role in the United States’ counterterrorism strategy.

We are operating in a vastly changed environment today, one that makes it much more difficult for al-Qa'ida to peddle its propaganda. The events frequently referred to as the Arab Spring have offered new and much better alternatives to citizens of these nations—alternatives rooted in their own desires and aspirations.

Al-Qa'ida is glaringly absent from these breathtaking developments. It has not been a significant player in the transformations we witnessed during the past year. No one is more aware of this than al-Qa'ida itself. Even as it has tried to get on the side of the protestors, by endorsing their struggles and offering its rhetorical support, the group has met with rejection. Not only has al-Qa'ida been physically absent and played no role in mobilizing the protests, it has also been absent from much of the discourse in the Arab world on what these protests mean and the way forward. Al-Qa'ida is increasingly marginalized in the Middle East, an organization that is rarely on people’s minds and even less present in the general political consciousness.

That’s not to say that al-Qa'ida and its affiliates in Iraq, Yemen, or Somalia are no longer a threat or that they no longer want to inflict damage. Nor can we rule out the very real possibility that some al-Qa'ida affiliates will sharpen their focus on attacking the United States. We expect al-Qa'ida and its supporters to continue to seek every opportunity and advantage to get back into the discussion, seize on chaos or discontent, and reach out anew to potential recruits and supporters.

But when they try to do this in the communications arena, CSCC will be there to meet them, using the tools of engagement to confront, discredit, and marginalize their appeals. That is the mission that has been entrusted to us, and it is one we will continue to carry out with determination and sustained commitment.

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