



Countering ISIL's Ideology

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Statement submitted for the conference "Taking the Fight to ISIL: Operationalizing CT Lines of Effort Against the Islamic State Group"

Washington Institute for Near East Policy

February 2, 2015

Good Morning. First off, let me say thank you to Dr. Levitt and to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy for holding this significant event, and for allowing me the opportunity to speak with you all today.

Let me begin my remarks by discussing the ways that we at the Department are engaging the issue of countering violent extremism and how we are leveraging our approaches to deal with foreign fighters. First, our approach to countering violent extremism emphasizes the power of local communities. Well-informed and well-equipped families, local institutions, and communities represent the strongest bulwark against violent extremists. While there is no single panacea to stopping the flow of foreign fighters or the radicalization to violence of a lone-offender, our hope is that in supporting strong and safe communities they will help to protect us from a terrorist attack by an individual, or group, recruited or inspired by a violent extremist organization.

Second, the increasingly sophisticated use of the Internet and mainstream social media by violent extremists has added an additional layer of complexity. We have built into our engagement efforts an understanding that youth spend more and more time online in a space that is impossible to completely monitor. Given this shift in landscape, we are working to ensure that communities that may be targeted and youth are aware of the dangers of online recruitment to violence.

Third, the threat posed by violent extremism is not constrained by international borders, as we now unfortunately know only too well. Over the last year, DHS, along with the rest of the Interagency and U.S. allies, has mounted a vigorous campaign to address threats posed by foreign fighter travel to and from Syria. We are working closely with our international partners and other international law enforcement organizations to exchange analysis, best practices, engagement tactics, and case studies on violent extremists—including foreign terrorist fighters.

Threat Overview

The consistent level of violent extremist activity, as well as the potential for conflict areas such as Syria to inspire and mobilize US- and Europe-based homegrown violent extremists to participate in or support acts of violence, is increasingly concerning. As the recent attacks in Canada and France illustrate, this threat is significant and growing exponentially. The conflict in Syria has become a matter of homeland security, and we

are very focused on foreign terrorist fighters heading to Syria. Unfortunately, we are aware that individuals from the United States are traveling or attempting to travel to Syria to fight in the conflict.

Violent extremist groups – such as The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) – are leveraging online tools to propagate messages of violence, identify and groom potential recruits, and supplement real-world recruitment efforts. ISIL’s public messaging and social media is exceedingly slick and dangerously effective. The threat of ISIL to our homeland continues to be one of our chief concerns at DHS, particularly as it relates to foreign fighters who may return home from Syria with tools of the terrorist trade and use them against their own country. In addition, the threat from individuals who self-radicalize to violence, the so-called “lone-offender”, in many respects may be the terrorist threat to the homeland that is the hardest to detect. Consequently, one of the Department’s top priorities is applying our CVE tools to help solve the foreign fighter problem.

Community Engagement

As part of our CVE efforts, the Department regularly engages with diverse community groups across the United States in order to strengthen resistance to violent extremist recruitment efforts and empower community opposition to violent extremism. We are working with communities to challenge narratives that violent extremists are using to recruit young Americans. Our approach is premised on the principle that communities are at the forefront of preventing radicalization to violence, and that active engagement with diverse communities can undermine key recruiting narratives used by violent extremist groups, such as al-Qaida, al-Nusra Front, and ISIL.

As such, the Department has implemented a number of community engagement initiatives as part of its overall efforts to address the growing threat from terrorist foreign fighters. Through our Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, we have created a more targeted and focused plan aimed at expanding Syria-specific engagement.

We have, in strong cooperation with NCTC, developed and implemented the Community Awareness Briefing (CAB)—a program designed to share unclassified information with communities regarding the threat of violent extremism. The CAB has been successfully conducted in 15 U.S. cities. It is a preventative measure that helps communities and law enforcement develop the necessary understanding of violent extremist recruitment tactics and explore ways to collectively and holistically address these threats, before they become a challenge at the local level. Due to the increased number of Western-based fighters traveling to foreign war conflicts, such as Syria, the Community Awareness Briefing now includes information relating to the foreign fighter recruitment narrative and the myths versus realities of the situation in Syria. This has led to increased efforts among community partners to mitigate the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters.

Also, with NCTC, we have developed the Community Resiliency Exercise (CREX). This half-day table-top exercise, using hypothetical foreign fighter scenarios, based on a collection of true stories of individuals recruited to violence, has worked to improve communication between law enforcement and communities to counter foreign terrorist fighter occurrences.

Way Forward

Today, it is essential that we continue to empower our communities and our partners at all levels. We must ensure that communities understand the role they play in preventing violent attacks from taking place and the

direct responsibility they have in countering violent extremism in partnership with law enforcement and other authorities. Ultimately, the Department believes that everyone—every single American—has a role to play in the safety and security of our nation, and time and again we have seen the advantage of public vigilance and cooperation, through information-sharing, community oriented policing, and citizen awareness.

Thank you for your time.