

# Reforming U.S. Counterterrorism Assistance Programs

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On February 12, 2009, Washington Institute senior fellow and director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence Matthew Levitt addressed a roundtable discussion hosted by Counterterrorism Blog and the Potomac Institute. The following is a transcript of his remarks.

I don't claim to be an expert on the issue of capacity building or training assistance per say, but I recently coauthored a Washington Institute monograph with my colleague Michael Jacobson, [\*\*The Money Trail: Finding, Following and Freezing Terrorist Finances \(templateC04.php?CID=302\)\*\*](#), and one of the things we focused on there was capacity-building programs. There is a lot to be learned by looking at technical assistance and capacity building in this one particular area of combating terror finance. I will give you a brief presentation on our findings, highlighting some of our findings from our field research in the Gulf.

We went into this assuming the problem was a lack of money. To be sure, there is a need for further investment in this area because there is the opportunity for a huge bang for relatively little buck. But the biggest problems we found regarding existing training and capacity-building programs was not lack of funding but a lack of coordination, both domestically and internationally. Domestically, there is no one department, agency, or office empowered to be the focal point for the various training programs run through S/CT, Treasury, FBI, or elsewhere. S/CT might be the office best situated to assume such a role, since they have been in this business for a long time and have the institutional knowledge. But having knowledge and being willing doesn't mean they are empowered to do so.

In one Gulf country in particular, we met with embassy and law enforcement personnel who are there on the ground overseeing and providing training. They made it clear that there was no coordination domestically among U.S. departments and agencies, let alone with other governments or international organizations. Interviews with U.S. officials back here in Washington yielded similar complaints. The U.S. embassy personnel found that the same or similar training programs are being provided over and over in this particular country. Worse, we don't have a lot of say in who gets the training; it's the recipient country that gets to determine who attends these training sessions. The training is usually perceived as a perk, so the person who is sent to be trained is not the customs official at the border or the investigator scrutinizing bank accounts but someone higher up with a nicer title that gets the mini-vacation of attending the training. Because this person is influential, they will sometimes attend the same or similar training sessions more than once. In other words, we found that training courses often overlap substantively and frequently end up training the wrong people.

Then you have the problem that in some countries what they are really looking for is more "dressing" than

substantive expertise. In the Gulf in particular, some countries are more interested in being able to point to all the training courses their people have attended than they are in seeing that the right courses are offered, the right people are trained. They want to say, "Look at all the training we've had, we are at the cutting edge of due diligence and are reliable venues for investment." The implementation is far less important. We had one interesting meeting with one senior official who wanted us to see how comprehensive that country's AML/CTF law was. Black on white, words on paper, the law was indeed impressive -- especially for the Gulf. As the officials walked us through the various authorities they have under the new law, we asked how many times each authority had been implemented. In each case, the answer was that they had not used the authority at all. On paper it was impressive, but there was no implementation.

There are many areas that require training. We went to one Gulf country where a senior official insisted that since they had banned all unregistered hawaldars, and since none had registered, there were no hawaldars in the country. Apparently these officials had recently made a similar assertion to an IMF assessment team, which then returned to the hotel and asked a bunch of foreign expatriate workers how they got their money home and provided the list of hawaldars they compiled back to the government official.

There is also an overemphasis on training courses and an underemphasis on long-term programs. There is a place for short-term training courses, of course, but today there is a stark imbalance between short-term training and workshops and long-term programs. Some of the most effective programs we found involved embedding people in local ministries where they can work on a day-to-day basis and establish relationships. These relationships bear fruit later too, as foreign partners are more likely to trust and work with us having established relationships that last longer than the standard few days or weeks of a workshop. The ABA has embedded someone in Bahrain's Ministry of Justice, for example, with great results. Bahrain is the only Gulf country to have publically prosecuted a cell for al-Qaeda financing in the Middle East. (The cell members were sentenced to only six months in prison, but that was because under Bahraini law prosecutors can appeal an acquittal but not a sentence).

Technical assistance and capacity building has to be a higher, and better coordinated, priority. In particular, we should focus on those areas where we could have a particularly significant impact. There are some countries in Africa, for example, that simply do not disseminate the U.N. designation lists. Asked why, one country explained that the office that receives the lists only gets thirty dollars a month to spend on toner cartridges. Since the list is so long, and they lack computers to send the list electronically, they simply don't send it out to border guards or financial institutions.

Internally, we need a lead agency on these issues within the U.S. government. This would help a lot of problems in terms of how much money goes to State, DOD, etc. The interagency has begun to develop the kind of synergy needed on the counter-radicalization front, which is very closely tied into counterterrorism, of course, and a similar effort is needed on the technical-assistance and capacity-building side as well.

At The Washington Institute, we are about to publish the findings of a blue-ribbon bipartisan task force we convened on countering the ideology of radical extremism. Several of the recommendations we make there would apply to this discussion as well, especially as Congress considers whether the United States should -- or could -- provide training on counter-radicalization as well.

Internationally, whether it be something like the UN's CTED Victor discussed earlier or some other mechanism like the IMF, there needs to be far greater coordination of training programs offered by individual countries, regional bodies like the EU, and multilateral organizations like the UN. At one point, the IMF tried to put together a list of all the training offered by international partners, but many countries -- including the United States -- refused to participate. That was a missed opportunity. ❖

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