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Congress Must Set High Bar for White House Strategic Communications Plan

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The U.S. government is struggling to coordinate the volumes of information from the many agencies and departments that make up slices of the public diplomacy and strategic communications pie. Congress needs to use its oversight to evaluate the variety of agencies, set specific goals, and ensure that the vital work of public diplomacy moves forward.

The Newest Player: The CSCC. The key groups involved in strategic communications are primarily the State Department, the Department of Defense, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), but the intelligence agencies and others are included. Last year, to address this challenge, the Administration established the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) within the State Department's Bureau of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. This has been capably led by Richard LeBaron, former deputy chief of mission at the U.S. embassy in London. It functions as an interagency war room that attempts to coordinate messaging through participating departments, provide guidance to embassies, and put out brush fires as they arise. This kind of coordination has been sorely missing for most of a decade, and at the very least the CSCC was a step in the right direction.

Unfortunately, the CSCC has been hindered by a lack of muscle. To increase the effectiveness of the CSCC, the Obama White House is producing an executive order to boost the Center's work and has proposed giving it a budget of its own in the fiscal year 2012 State Department budget—to the

tune of \$6.2 million. Before the government sets out to spend more money, however, and before any potential reorganization takes place, Congress needs to ask how the CSCC is contributing to combating terrorism and its root cause, the radicalization of Muslim youth. Congress should also explore the CSCC's relationship with the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) under the Director of National Intelligence. The two centers have a common purpose but only a tangential relationship. As the CSCC completes its first year, Congress also needs to explore what it has delivered and what future deliverables are going to be. Most importantly, CSCC needs to move beyond process to measurable outcomes that allow Congress to hold the Administration accountable.

Setting Specific Goals. After two years, the White House needs to get beyond reorganizing and start getting things done. Most fundamentally, it must craft a government-wide counterterrorism communications strategy, assigning the different government agencies specific goals, areas of responsibility, and metrics for success.

There is a wide range of critical strategic communications tasks that have to be addressed. Many

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are related to counterterrorism, but not all. These important tasks include:

- **Responding rapidly to misinformation.** The Digital Outreach Team needs to counter anti-American conspiracy theories in Pakistan and elsewhere. The U.S. government badly needs the rapid response capability to counter enemy propaganda and other misinformation. The cumbersome clearance process within the State Department is antithetical to the concept of rapid response, which means that this capability may better be housed in another agency—NCTC, for instance.
- **Combating radical Islamists.** The U.S. needs to craft an official anti-Islamist narrative that can help discredit the ideology of jihad against non-Muslims. In order to do this, analysts need a better understanding of the narratives that motivate young Muslims to become radicalized. Both the Pentagon's Office of Information Support (formerly psychological operations) and the CSCC are doing work in this area.
- **Aiding Iran's Green Movement.** U.S. agencies should spotlight Tehran's past assassination campaigns against opposition leaders in exile, as well as its continued financial support of terrorist organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah while the Iranian people are increasingly impoverished. These are classic public diplomacy targets.
- **Formulating a multi-tiered Internet freedom strategy.** The U.S. should go beyond funding for Internet circumvention technology and should mount a strong push for international coopera-

tion through a coalition of nations willing to stand up for freedom of expression.

- **Securing broadcast cooperation.** The U.S. should work with the Broadcasting Board of Governors to make international broadcasting part of an integrated government-wide U.S. counterterrorism communications strategy. The firewall established by the U.S. International Broadcasting Act of 1994 between State and BBG to ensure editorial independence for the broadcasters has turned into a detriment in terms of resource allocation and lack of congressional oversight.

Accountability Is the First Step. Congress needs a standard by which it can measure whether the White House is keeping its promise to meet the most critical challenges of strategic communication. If the Administration could make progress on the tasks listed here, it would give Congress several measurable outcomes. Significant resources are available throughout the government, but someone needs the power to set the direction and break down barriers.

In the information age, communications strategy is a key element of national security. It is high time the U.S. government developed the capabilities to meet the public diplomacy challenges of the 21st century.

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