



COUNTER-MESSAGING -DAESH-

Interagency Fellowship Program
support to State Department

BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL JOHN WILLIAMS

"We're stepping up our efforts to discredit ISIL's propaganda, especially online. The United Arab Emirate's new messaging hub - the Sawab Center - is exposing ISIL for what it is, which is a band of terrorists that kills innocent Muslim men, women and children. We're working to lift up the voices of Muslim scholars, clerics and others - including ISIL defectors - who courageously stand up to ISIL and its warped interpretations of Islam." — President Obama, September 29, 2015⁰¹

OVERVIEW

Over the last 12 months, I have implemented both my military education and 14 years of experience within Irregular Warfare⁰² as a Department of Defense Strategic Planner participating in the Commanding General Staff College Interagency Fellowship program with the State Department's Global Engagement Center. On March 14, 2016, President Barack Obama mandated the creation of the GEC. Executive Order 13721 marks an intensification of the United States Government's efforts to combat violent extremism on the information battlefield. The GEC leads the coordination, integration and synchronization of government-wide activities directed at foreign audiences abroad for the purpose of countering violent extremism and terrorism. The GEC empowers governmental and nongovernmental partners to speak out and provide alternatives to Daesh's nihilistic vision.

Daesh uses propaganda campaigns to portray life under their rule as utopian, but inhabitants living in Daesh-controlled territories endure oppressive rule and economic hardship. While Daesh pushes videos of its members enjoying lavish meals in looted homes in Mosul, the local population is suffering. Citizens are in urgent need of essential services, including the markets are barren and the universities are abandoned.

Many foreign fighters believe that by fighting with Daesh they are helping to protect Muslims and Islam. However, the majority of Daesh's victims have been Muslims. Further, Daesh continues to exact its evil upon innocents of all faiths – targeting religious institutions and clergy members, including those of Islam, which it claims to protect and defend.

Research and anecdotal media reports suggest that Daesh influences and radicalizes young people – both in Muslim-majority coun-

tries and the West - by tapping into a sense of alienation, loss, loneliness, perceived and real injustice and/or altruistic intentions. In some Muslim-majority countries, corruption, economic necessities and a lack of infrastructure and community support facilities are also factors. Recruitment of women in Western countries also focuses on romance.

While Daesh refines and changes its messages depending on the group targeted for recruitment, the sense of alienation, the desire to do good and be part of something larger than themselves, and a need for companionship and camaraderie figure prudentially in all messaging.

STRUCTURE AND APPROACH

To drive an integrated approach, the GEC draws on an interagency staff from the Departments of Defense, Justice, Homeland Security and Treasury, the Small Business Administration, the National Counterterrorism Center, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Intelligence Community, the Broadcast Board of Governors and USAID to implement new approaches to disrupt extremist propaganda. The GEC's work

02
A reformed Islamic extremist tells an international gathering of government and military cybersecurity professionals how radical Muslim groups use the internet and social media to recruit and finance their operations. DoD PHOTO BY KARLHEINZ WEDHORN

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falls into five core areas: Network Engagement; Analytics; Resources; Content/Production; and Partnership (see figure 01).⁰³

The GEC is a government-funded interagency organization entrusted to decipher and break the Daesh brand online by empowerment and amplification of locally credible voices that can change the perception of violent extremist groups and their ideology among key demographic segments.⁰⁴ The solution is not obvious and success is surely not guaranteed; however, disruption of the existing violent extremist messaging apparatus diminishes the influence of extremist organizations.

Counter-messaging opportunities are achieved through the GEC's thematic campaigns that promote collaboration under a common, multifaceted and long-term strategy to degrade and defeat Daesh's propaganda. Thematic campaigns amplify Daesh's inability to govern, failure to provide healthcare, inadequate living conditions, the dishevelment of the family unit and *exposing the true nature of the organization*.⁰⁵ Counter-messaging as a line of effort within the National Strategy to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is critical in the prevention and intervention stages of the life cycle of radicalization. However, State Department communicators are encouraged to share both content and product in order to empower foreign government partners and third party validators for their use in counter-Daesh messaging and outreach. Examples of Thematic campaigns are the Defectors Campaign, Counter Terrorism Bureau/Counter Violent Extremism Office and GEC Youth UNGA Side Event.

DEFECTORS CAMPAIGN: UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY (UNGA) SIDE EVENT

The GEC conducted an information awareness campaign in Arabic and English on Daesh Defectors to raise awareness of the utility of former-Daesh members in messaging against Daesh, September 21-25, 2015. The campaign's goal was to highlight the backgrounds, reasons for joining and defecting and methods of defection of Defectors. The campaign's overall objectives were to help raise awareness about the utility of defector testimony in the fight against ISIL, to discourage additional recruits from joining,

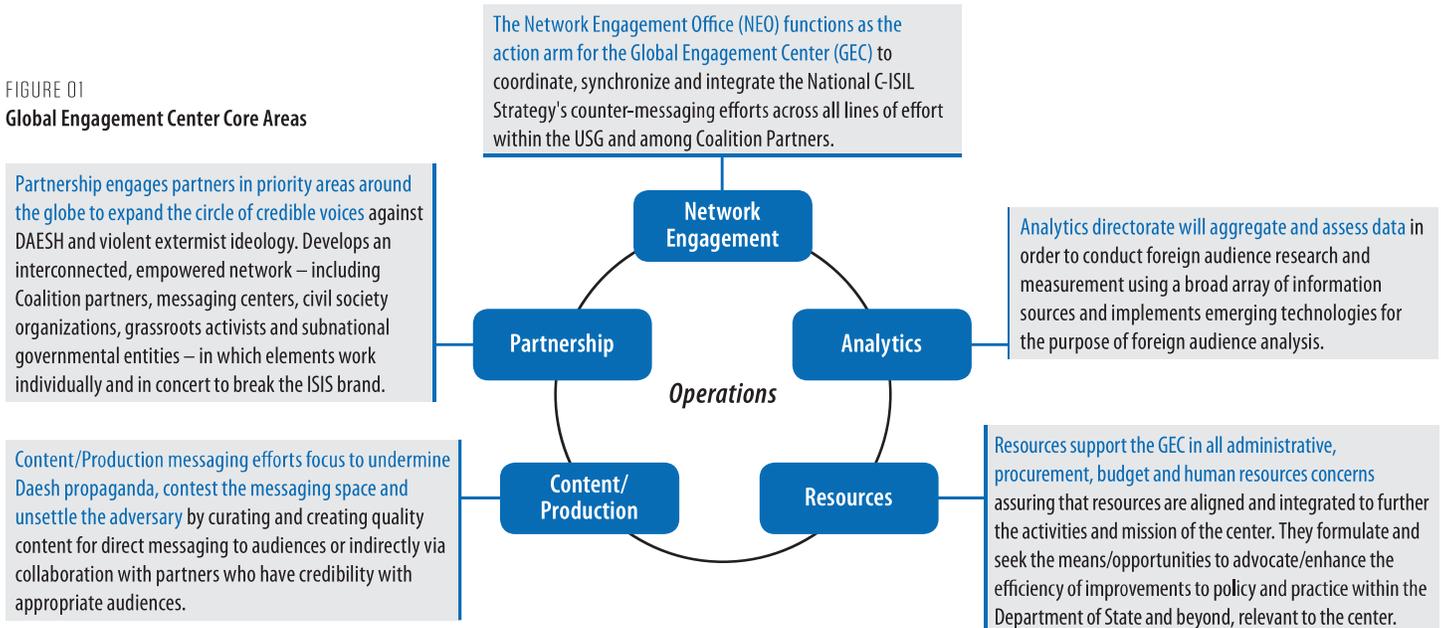
potentially encourage additional Daesh Defectors to speak out to the media and encourage the media to seek them out and compel UNGA and top-level officials to discuss Defectors during the Countering Violent Extremism conference and draw attention to Defectors' stories.

#WhytheyleftDaesh highlights the trend of increasing numbers of Daesh members who have become disillusioned after recognizing that the harsh reality of life under Daesh falls short of their recruiters' promises. The GEC has long seen the utility in amplifying the stories of former Daesh members who have managed to escape, through a variety of means, and have returned to non- Daesh controlled territories. These first-hand accounts expose the harsh reality about what life is like under Daesh- and GEC is working to amplify them accordingly.

Former Violent Extremists' testimonies provide some of the most effective narratives against extremist recruitment efforts. Three topline narratives are: 1) some fighters join because Daesh claims to be the defender of Muslims. In reality, it is massacring them, including Sunnis, whom they claim to protect; 2) many fighters joined Daesh to help individuals they viewed as suffering, only to become disillusioned once they realize they have exacerbated the situation and hurt more people; and 3) upon arrival to the so-called "caliphate" most foreign fighters immediately begin to miss home once they realize the lands of Daesh are not what their recruiters claimed it would be.

Overall, the Daesh Defector Campaign was a worthwhile first attempt at coordinat-

FIGURE 01
Global Engagement Center Core Areas



ed messaging for the GEC, yielding notable accolades throughout. The overall discussion of defectors saw more than 9,400 mentions during the campaign period, while the campaign hashtags saw 3,339 mentions and roughly 5 percent of which was from USG properties. Twitter saw the most activity during the campaign, accounting for 88 percent of the total conversation, including supporting Tweets from high profile users like the United Kingdom's Prime Minister David Cameron. Facebook was the second most popular platform, though with only 354 mentions, it lagged far behind Twitter. The discussion surrounding Daesh defectors was mentioned in 897 news articles and saw positive commentary from several notable journalists, such as Christiane Amanpour and Jake Tapper (via Twitter). The campaign itself, as well as GEC, was mentioned in 30 articles over the course of the campaign.⁰⁶

One of the areas of success worth mentioning was the media coverage generated about defectors during this time frame. The news angle for most stories was the release of the defectors report by the London-based International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence. Most stories highlighted that the number of defectors is increasing and the reasons for defecting include: quality of life under Daesh, the killing of other Muslims, not wanting to be suicide bombers, action/heroism goals not met and corruption and infighting among Daesh.

CNN's "Amanpour" show interviewed ICSR's Peter Neumann, who highlighted these topics, as well as discussed how these defectors could become credible voices to deter potential recruits from joining Daesh. He also discussed how difficult it is for people to leave Daesh-held territory and return to their hometowns. He estimates the 58 interviewees represent hundreds who left but do not want to go public for legal, safety or cultural reasons, as well as people who want to leave Daesh but have not found a way to do so. He also discussed sexual abuse issues related to women in Daesh-held territory. The interview was approximately five minutes and posted to CNN's website.

CT/CVE AND GEC YOUTH SIDE EVENT ON CVE ON THE MARGINS OF THE 2016 UNGA

In the September 2015 UNGA side event on CVE, Search for Common Ground and the Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor entered into an agreement with the overall purpose to co-host the Global Youth Summit on Building Resilience to Violent Extremism. SFCG designed this event to empower young leaders to expand their efforts to counter, prevent and build resilience to violent extremism in their communities through approaches that respect differences and build on commonalities.

CT/CVE and the GEC will build on the momentum of last year's event by holding an additional youth event on CVE, which will be complementary to the high-level event coordinated by the EU. CT/CVE and the GEC will tailor this year's side event to Youth Ministers and delegates and will encourage them to share experiences on what has worked in their countries on community engagement, building resilience, addressing violent extremism and how they have worked together to prevent and counter violent extremism. The youth side event will feature tangible examples of government-youth collaboration on CVE initiatives. Youth officials and their civil society or community counterparts would discuss their efforts – and associated challenges and results – in a roundtable with the CVE Deputy Coordinator, the Special Advisor for Global Youth Issues and a tech sector entity that has developed relevant CVE programs with youth worldwide.

CONCLUSION

The GEC is designed to be as agile and adaptive as our adversary. When fully armed with new authorities, personnel and cutting-edge technology. Again, the GEC is charged with coordinating, integrating and synchronizing all government communications directed at foreign audiences abroad used to diminish the influence of violent extremists.

When fully operational, the GEC will comprise staff from the Departments of Defense, Treasury, Justice, State, Homeland Security and the Intelligence Community. Working across these agencies, the center is identifying efficiencies and opportunities in the messaging space, particularly with the Department of Defense and the Intelligence Community.

The GEC has pivoted from direct online engagement to partner-driven messaging and content. While the U.S. government has a good message to tell, we are not always the most credible voice to tell it. Instead, there is an abundance of credible and diverse voices across the Middle East, Europe and Africa—governments, NGOs and civil society groups—that's the future in leveraging the Countermessaging battlespace.⁰⁷ 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lieutenant Colonel John Williams is a Department of State Strategic Planner at the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism, Countering Violent Extremist Office.

NOTES **01.** United Nations General Assembly; Closing remarks President Obama, 29 September 2015. **02.** Countering Irregular Threats Joint Operating Concept (JOC); http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/concepts/joint_concepts/joc_iw_v2.pdf, May 17, 2010. **03.** Department of State factsheet: The Global Engagement Center <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/07/259376.htm>, July 8, 2016. **04.** State and USAID Joint Strategy on CVE: Strategic Objective <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/>, May 4, 2016. **05.** White House FACT SHEET: Strategy to Counter-ISIL. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/fact-sheet-strategy-counter-islamic-state-iraq-and-levant-isil>, September 10, 2014. **06.** After Action Report/Improvement Plan: Defector's Campaign, October 15, 2015. **07.** Statement before the 114th Congress U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Government Affairs: Chief of Staff for the Global Engagement Center; Meagen M. LaGraffe, July 6, 2016.