Statement of Ambassador Alberto M. Fernandez
Coordinator for the Center of Strategic Counterterrorism Communications
before the
House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade

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Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Sherman, Members of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I am extremely pleased to be with you this afternoon to discuss the interagency Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC). As you know, representatives of my senior staff and I met with many staffers representing the House Foreign Affairs Committee two months ago on June 1st for an introductory briefing. We were very pleased with the offers of support that followed.

Al-Qa'ida has repeatedly made clear the importance it attaches to the media struggle. Al-Zawahiri has described the communications space as "more than half the battle," and Western scholars of this terrorist organization and its affiliates have noted the centrality of communications to the work of these groups. CSCC was established at the direction of the President and Secretary of State in September 2010 to coordinate, orient, and inform government-wide foreign communications activities targeted against terrorism and violent extremism. It builds on the pioneering work done in the previous Administration to respond rapidly and effectively to al-Qa'ida terrorist messaging and was formally codified by an Executive Order on September 9, 2011. CSCC operates under the broad policy direction of the White House and interagency leadership and is housed in the Department of State with the Under Secretary of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. I report directly to the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Tara Sonenshine, and we work very closely with the Bureau of Counterterrorism (CT), other Department bureaus, and other government agencies. In addition, we have a Steering Committee chaired by Under Secretary Sonenshine, with Counterterrorism Coordinator Ambassador Daniel Benjamin as vice chair. The committee includes representatives from nine agencies, including the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), the Departments of Defense, Treasury, Justice, Homeland Security, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and held its initial meeting earlier this year.

I also want to acknowledge the superb effort of my predecessor, Ambassador Richard LeBaron, now retired, in working so hard and effectively to give CSCC its very specific focus and inter-agency character.

We target a very specific audience overseas through our products for U.S. government communicators, projects and the online engagement of our Digital Outreach Team (DOT). These efforts are conducted in collaboration with U.S. embassies and consulates, interagency partners, and outside experts. To achieve these goals, CSCC is divided into three distinct areas of operation.

Intelligence and Analysis
Analytic support from the Intelligence Community (IC), academia, and other sources of relevant expertise is essential to CSCC's mission to counter the actions and ideologies of al-Qa'ida, its affiliates and adherents, other terrorist organizations, and violent extremists overseas that threaten the interests and national security of the United States. During the past 18 months, we have taken several steps to integrate collection and analysis into our process for devising counter-narratives. We share this analysis in support of other efforts to counter the ideologies and activities of such organizations as well. The assignment of senior IC analysts to the CSCC staff and a Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility (SCIF) working environment integrates analysis into all aspects of CSCC activities and facilitates a robust working relationship with IC elements. We are pursuing additional opportunities to institutionalize an analytically driven process for CSCC that builds on these earlier efforts and will serve as a strategic roadmap for our future work.

CSCC subscribes to two guiding principles for the Center's operations:

Counterterrorism Communications must be guided by the best intelligence and academic analysis of the audience, the adversary, and the appropriate communications themes and techniques; and

This must be an interagency effort, drawing on existing analytical and operational skills across a number of U.S. government agencies. The detail to CSCC of Intelligence Community and U.S. military personnel make this feasible.

Drawing extensively on the subject matter expertise of the CSCC staff, Intelligence Community analysis, and academic work, CSCC has implemented a variety of projects directly supporting U.S. government communicators working with overseas audiences. Examples fall into four broad categories:

Orchestrate baseline analysis and solicit opportunity analysis: CSCC commissioned a research and analysis project to codify al-Qa'ida master narratives as perceived by different local audiences, focusing particularly on two case studies in Yemen and Algeria that are being used to shape effective counter-narratives. The Open Source Center (OSC) and NCTC were partners in this project which has been useful to our field posts and other communicators.

Identify and fill collection gaps: CSCC orchestrated interagency collaboration to commission a public opinion survey in Somalia seeking to understand local perceptions of al-Shabaab and other concerns, data that had been unavailable in the absence of an official U.S. presence. The Somali Unit in Embassy Nairobi, relevant bureaus in the Department of State, the Department of Defense's SOLIC and Africa Command, and other agencies, all contributed to the survey design and implementation. Results of the survey are being factored into our program planning and messaging.

Provide grist for confronting al-Qa'ida rhetoric through direct digital engagement: The managers for the Digital Outreach Team (DOT) draw on OSC reports and finished intelligence to shape CSCC's online strategy and to prioritize themes and counter-messages for the DOT.

Develop tools for U.S. government communicators: CSCC partnered with OSC to establish a community website that assembles content and is accessible to all U.S. government communicators through OpenSource.gov.

Metrics and Evaluation. A key component in refining our activities directed against violent extremism rests in developing a capacity to measure operational effectiveness, as well as evaluating resonance among our varied target audiences. While we have measures of performance, we are in the process of hiring a staff member who will be responsible for developing and refining measures of effectiveness (MOE) for our communications activities aimed at countering the activities and ideologies of terrorist organizations. The individual will collaborate with CSCC colleagues and others across U.S. government agencies to identify best practices among existing approaches to MOE development, data collection, and measurement, as well as commission new research or methodologies as needed for CSCC's mission.

Plans and Operations
The second area within CSCC is the Plans and Operations team, which designs and implements non-digital CVE communication strategies, tools, and programs to counter al-Qa'ida's ability to recruit and win support. The team has 13 positions with members from across the interagency including representatives from the Departments of Defense and State and the Intelligence Community. The section focuses on confronting, countering and undermining the efforts of al-Qa'ida and its affiliates and supporters in, and emanating from, five priority areas:

- al-Shabaab in the Horn of Africa
- al-Qa'ida senior leadership (AQSL) and its affiliates and allies in Pakistan and Afghanistan
- al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its associations in North and West Africa
- al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen and the broader Arabian Peninsula
- al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) and its offshoots in the Fertile Crescent

The Plans and Operations team works closely with Department of State Regional Bureaus, the CT Bureau, U.S. missions and U.S. government communicators in key countries to strengthen the U.S. government's communications and engagement efforts against al-Qa'ida and affiliates. These efforts include:

- **Somalia:** CSCC's strategy for countering al-Shabaab has led to implementation of programs involving collaboration by Embassy Nairobi's Public Diplomacy section, as well as the Somalia Unit at the Embassy, DoD's Military Information Support Team (MIST), USAID in Kenya, State's CT Bureau, and the NGO community. This model – sharing responsibility across aligned objectives - promotes optimal use of each office's expertise, resources, authorities, and time to reach Somali audiences inside and beyond Somalia. For example, CSCC obtained a privately produced documentary showcasing al-Shabaab's tragic impact on U.S.-Somali families and developed it into a packaged project

for use by U.S. government communicators abroad to engage with Somali diaspora communities.

- **Pakistan**: CSCC coordinated Washington support and contributions for the Pakistan Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Communications Framework and the creation of a Community Engagement Office at the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad. The Plans and Operations team supports CVE programs for Pakistan conducted by the Community Engagement Office, while CSCC's Digital Outreach Team reaches online audiences through Urdu language engagement.

- **Algeria**: CSCC is an active participant in an interagency team that worked with the U.S. Embassy in Algiers to create a strategy to guide programming and expenditures in that country to counter the activities and ideology of terrorist organizations. CSCC also managed three research projects to fill critical information gaps for planners, and designed and funded a program with the embassy that will reach vulnerable youth in areas known for al-Qa'ida recruitment.

- **Resilient Communities Program**: Throughout the world, survivors of terrorism inspire us with their strength and resilience. CSCC works with embassies from Argentina to Australia to support local NGOs and victim groups' efforts to amplify the voices of victims and communities. Through our Resilient Communities small grants program, we support projects that capture victims' stories and testimonies in these countries, often for the first time, and share them with audiences in their communities and beyond. The projects utilize a range of engagement tools and media, and many include online sites to make their stories available to audiences worldwide.

The Plans and Operations team also provides public communication materials that focus on countering AQ rhetoric for use by all U.S. government communicators with overseas foreign audiences. These tools include **CSCC Communication Templates** on topics such as "Al-Qa'ida Not Welcome in Arab Spring" and "Highlighting Al-Shabaab's Actions Against Somalis." CSCC also provides "**Quick Thought**" products to orient and inform U.S. government communication efforts – recent "Quick Thoughts" include "A Plague of Locusts: CT Messaging Against AQIM and Ansar al-Din," "One Path to Address CT Concerns in Syria without Helping the Regime or Alienating the Opposition" and "Al-Qa'ida and Al-Shabaab Merger: A Counter-Messaging Opportunity?"

CSCC Digital Operations
CSCC's third section is the Digital Outreach Team (DOT), which directly counters the al-Qa'ida narrative and propaganda in interactive digital environments, working in Arabic, Urdu and Somali and using text, still images and video. The team was initially created in 2006 as an online rapid-reaction unit focused on general Public Diplomacy goals. When it became a part of CSCC in late 2010, the DOT's mission shifted to counterterrorism, with a specific focus on al-Qa'ida and the constellation of like-minded terrorist groups associated and affiliated with al-Qa'ida.

DOT's current configuration and operations reflect the objectives and priorities in the Executive Order establishing CSCC and the National Strategy for Counterterrorism, which names Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia as focus areas for counterterrorism efforts. The team consists of 10 Arabic-speaking writer-analysts, five Urdu speakers, and two Somali speakers, as well as a

director and deputy director. Three members of the team are video producers—two Arabic speakers and one Urdu speaker—in order to keep pace with an online environment that increasingly runs on video. The approximate budget for CSCC digital operations is $3 million annually, about half of CSCC's entire budget.

Most of the team's engagements, which number more than 17,000 since its inception and more than 7,000 since becoming part of CSCC, consist of written text posted to online forums, *Facebook* or the comment sections of media websites. The team works primarily in mainstream interactive environments where al-Qa'ida and its supporters seek to radicalize disaffected youth. Engagements are branded—writer-analysts identify themselves as members of the Digital Outreach Team at the U.S. Department of State. The team makes active use of video and graphics. In-house video producers put together mash-ups that illustrate arguments against al-Qa'ida using vivid imagery. Because these clips generally use publicly available footage under fair-use rules, production costs are low and mostly limited to staff time. We are seeking to expand more into video and other visual material in response to the changing tastes of our target audience.

Three basic principles animate the team's activities: Contest the space, redirect the conversation, and confound the adversary. The first involves establishing an overt U.S. government presence to push back at al-Qa'ida narrative and propaganda and counter the misinformation about the United States that frequently fuels extremist narratives. Put simply, where al-Qa'ida supporters attempt to post propaganda in mainstream environments, the Digital Outreach Team is there to quickly hit back. Team members do this by acting on the second principle—redirecting the conversation to topics that are detrimental to al-Qa'ida, like the group's atrocious record of killing Muslims, its own dissonance and internal contradictions and its failure to achieve anything positive. Finally, by denying al-Qa'ida the ability to spread its message freely in virtual environments, and by shifting discussions to uncomfortable areas for al-Qa'ida, the team seeks to "get in their heads," confounding and discomfiting al-Qa'ida's online supporters and sympathizers so that they can no longer operate with impunity in virtual environments.

In line with these principles, the team organizes much of its work around targeted campaigns. For example, when al-Qa'ida media units or supporters post banners, the team often mimics them, creating new banners that resemble al-Qa'ida propaganda in form but expose the group's destructive means and ends. The team then posts the new banners to interactive websites alongside the originals. As al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula made a bid to hold ground in Southern Yemen, the Digital Outreach Team countered with a campaign that began in late 2011 and have continued through mid-2012. With more than 600 engagements, as well as several video clips and banners, the team highlighted al-Qa'ida's abominable methods and aims on locally focused platforms, including Yemeni tribal forums, in order to reach the audience most at risk. An Urdu-language campaign in June-July 2012 pushed back against extremist narratives in Pakistan with examples of U.S.-funded aid projects—for more than 30 days, the team carried out 255 engagements using 10 videos and 10 still images on 29 online platforms, reaching nearly 50,000 people through *Facebook* and forums and generating over 400 comments.

The DOT receives strong support from CSCC's interagency partners. One concrete example: Open source intelligence is particularly important for a team engaged in attributed

communications. CSCC works closely with the DNI's Open Source Center to ensure that a steady stream of open source reporting on four types of materials detrimental to al-Qa'ida--reports about the victims of terrorism, defectors, derogatory information, and rebuttals of al-Qa'ida ideology--is channeled to the team for use in its engagements. More broadly, the Intelligence Community provides valuable analysis to inform strategic decision-making. Finally, the Team coordinates closely with the relevant Department of Defense components where mission sets overlap in order to achieve common objectives.

The team is relatively new, and while it has developed solid measures of performance, measures of effectiveness remain rudimentary, although CSCC is working hard to make them more rigorous. Measures of performance include ensuring the presence of counter-messaging in the same online environments where al-Qa'ida supporters post propaganda—a fundamental tenet of the team's work is to deprive al-Qa'ida of uncontested virtual space. An early measure of effectiveness has been irate responses from online extremists, who fulminated on various occasions, expressing a desire to hack the Digital Outreach Team's YouTube channel, warned their followers to be wary of providing fodder for the team, and even discussed the possibility of setting up their own Digital Outreach Team. Ongoing and planned efforts to develop more robust measures of effectiveness include the following:

- Adapting tools developed by Sandia National Laboratories to track the propagation of al-Qa'ida message and determine the concurrent presence of counter-messaging, and to use text analytics to fine-tune the supporting materials analysts use in their engagements. This ongoing project is funded mainly by the Department of Defense.
- Conducting focus groups to determine the effectiveness of video clips against al-Qa'ida. This project is slated for the fourth quarter of FY2012.
- Working with a fulltime metrics specialist, who will be part of the Integrated Analysis section of CSCC.

Digital environments are developing rapidly, as are al-Qa'ida efforts to exploit them. CSCC intends not only to keep pace, but to innovate. The rise of handheld devices provides an opportunity to do so. Our Digital Outreach Team has already deployed video with mobile platforms in mind in one of our highest priority areas—a recent Yemen-focused clip garnered 15-20 percent of views on mobile devices. Future plans include establishing a presence on mobile based interactive environments, distributing audio files over mobile devices to reach less literate audiences, and finding new ways to deliver digital content to the physical environment through handheld devices.

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Sherman and other committee members, I would like to thank you for your continued interest and support. Our work is still very new and evolving and we operate in a highly volatile and dynamic environment so certainly welcome all perspectives and insights that would help us respond and anticipate this challenge rapidly and effectively. Thank you very much.