



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

Countering Extremism in Yemen: Beyond Interagency Cooperation

by Kaz Kotlow

Extremism, especially violent extremism, is a clear threat to the national security of the United States. It is widely believed that effectively addressing quality of life issues, encouraging peaceful conflict resolution and enhancing political inclusion are critical to neutralizing extremist messaging, helping prevent the development and spread of violent extremism. Traditionally, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and The United States Department of State (DOS) are the primary agencies for development, with Department of Defense (DOD) efforts in support. But traditional “interagency cooperation” has often not resulted in effective programs. The U.S. Government (USG) should maximize integration of effort, bringing all government elements together from inception to planning and assessment, of a single coherent plan. DOD assets, from doctrine to personnel and funding, can be of great benefit in helping create and execute those integrated efforts.

States which cannot address the basic needs and aspirations of their people, can foster political and social “space” where extremist messaging is more likely to find an accepting audience. Improving the effectiveness of stability, development, and assistance efforts can enhance U.S. national security by addressing the drivers of instability and poverty, which create fertile territory for extremism and radicalization. Five of the seven Strategic Goals for DOS and USAID are clearly aligned with missions that DOD has also identified as critical to defeating extremism.¹ While operations in each country must be tailored to the environment in that country, this work will discuss Yemen in order to highlight the Country Team’s approach in planning, execution, integration and evaluation of what DOD describes as stability operations. Their approach may be seen as a test case for others facing similar challenges worldwide.

In December of 2005 the National Security Council published a directive outlining goals, roles and responsibilities for reconstruction, development and stabilization-type operations. The document identified State Department’s office of Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) as the lead agency for those efforts. Unfortunately, as noted in the Project for National Security Reform, in the current system “neither a lead organization nor a lead individual has the de jure or de facto authority to command independent departments and agencies.”² Consequently, motivated individuals at ground level continue to be the primary driving force for effective integration of effort.

USAID clearly addressed impediments to integration in its recently published policy on Civil-Military Cooperation. This policy recognizes the expertise and even funding that DOD can bring to bear, while noting that USAID retains primacy for overall USG assistance, development

1 U.S. Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development, Strategic Plan, Fiscal Years 2007-2012: Transformational Diplomacy. Washington, DC, May 2007, 10-11.

2 The Project on National Security Reform, Forging a New Shield, Washington, DC, Nov 2008, vii.

and stabilization efforts.³ The current Chief of the USAID mission in Yemen, Dr. Jeffrey Ashley, has worked closely with DOD on numerous occasions, most recently in Iraq. A number of other USAID officers and representatives from the Office of Transition Initiatives also previously worked closely alongside DOD counterparts. Dr. Ashley drew from those experiences to create a development/stability program that fully integrates all agencies of the U.S. Government (USG) into a continuous planning, execution, and assessment cycle.

Most sectors in Yemen, including internal politics, security and the economy, have been on a downward trend for many years. Consequently it is difficult to determine just where to start “stabilization operations”. DOD typically assists USAID in its mid to long-term goals for development and assistance. But recent high-profile operations by Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), sharpened the immediate focus of U.S. goals in Yemen. Two specific events highlighted the reach of AQAP outside of Yemen; the August 2009 attempted assassination of Prince Mohammad Bin-Naif, head of counterterrorism for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the failed suicide bombing attempt on Northwest Airlines flight 253, in December of 2009. Those attacks underlined the need for Yemeni counterterrorism forces to take direct action against AQAP. Concurrently, both the U.S. Embassy Country Team and Washington DC recognized the need for a more holistic, integrated approach to effectively address the near and long term threat of AQAP’s extremist messaging and recruiting efforts.

Counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine may provide a useful perspective for countering extremism, with its primacy on non-military, non-kinetic means to positively effect the population. Tightly focused military action against identified targets is usually necessary, and improving the sense of security for the population is critical to setting the stage for successful development, but they are the means to an end. Indeed, effective counterinsurgency is at heart a socio-political mission. Counterinsurgency is dynamic, not strapped to a single set-piece plan. The focus on the population is in essence the strategic offensive of COIN, with the goal of nullifying the traction of extremist arguments and recruiting. Kinetic operations are more tactical, addressing immediate threats. A coherent counterinsurgency strategy recognizes the need to tailor the approach to the circumstances and highlights the need to constantly monitor, assess and adjust. Consequently, maximum integration of effort across the Department of State, USAID and the Department of Defense is essential to create and execute an agile and successful program. The paradigm of counterinsurgency can foster that holistic, whole of government approach.⁴

An approved overarching strategy is crucial to developing a coherent plan of action. In the most recent Mission Strategic and Resource Plan, the Chief of Mission notes that the Country Team in Yemen will act as a laboratory for creating whole of government approaches for the wide variety of problems facing Yemen. Most importantly, the Ambassador detailed common USG goals for Yemen with the following statement.

The long-term vision for Yemen is a nation at peace with itself, able to provide basic services and economic opportunity to its citizens so that the multiple, competing centers of

³ U.S. Agency for International Development, *Civilian-Military Cooperation Policy*, Washington, DC, July 2008.

⁴ U.S. Department of Defense Joint Staff, *Joint Publication 3-24: Counterinsurgency Operations*, Washington, DC, October 2009, p. x.

gravity (tribes, opposition political parties, regional players) begin to see their interests served by an inclusive political process, and terrorist organizations no longer find an environment receptive to intolerance and violence. This environment will contribute materially to the achievement of our priorities in Yemen: prevent attacks on America's homeland, its citizens or economic interests abroad, as well as attacks on our allies.⁵

The USAID mission in Yemen used the common goals and strategy from national policy to guide its efforts. USAID initiated the program by trying to identify the primary drivers of instability and poverty. All DOD elements with representatives in country; The Office of Military Cooperation (OMC), Special Operations Command Forward, Yemen (SFY) personnel, and the Defense Attaché Office (DAO) participated in the process from its inception. The interagency group identified the following as likely primary drivers of instability and conflict; large youth bulge and rapidly growing population, growing natural resource scarcity, lack of economic opportunities, declining government revenues, corruption, limited state presence, violent Islamist extremism, unequal development and marginalized political representation. The group determined where USG programs could have the most impact with regards to both benefit to the population and ability to forward USG policy.⁶

The Embassy interagency group also studied the areas in question with regard to the ability of the USG to effectively deliver goods or services on the ground, with emphasis on the role of local tribal dynamics. U.S. military elements referred to their training experiences in various areas to help provide a more complete picture of the overall security situation and accessibility. The U.S. military elements also factored stability and development efforts into training plans with the Yemeni military. For example, SFY provided training, advice and assistance to facilitate the Yemeni Special Operations Forces (YSOF) in their delivery of medical assistance to Marib province.⁷ This mission had the dual benefit of improving the image of YSOF while enhancing security in an area identified as a high priority for USAID's development plans.

USAID also worked diligently to marry-up their Office of Transition Initiatives with the Civil-Military Support Element (CMSE) of SFY, enhancing overall integration of effort. This combined structure ensured seamless planning and execution of the Community Livelihoods and Responsive Governance initiative, which actively addresses a number of the key drivers of instability and violence.⁸ In areas considered too dangerous for a direct official US presence, the Embassy operates through a variety of U.S. or international contractors and non-governmental organizations. Counterinsurgency recognizes the critical importance of shaping the information battlespace. In Yemen, the Military Information Support Team (MIST) from SFY works directly with the Embassy Public Affairs Office (PAO), developing effective messaging to support all missions. When possible, it is important for the local population to be aware of U.S. efforts, to help mitigate extremist negative messaging. All of these efforts will be subject to periodic, independent evaluation to help determine effectiveness and guide future stability operations.

Integrated stability operations in Yemen are in their early stages, so it is difficult to gauge their impact on support for AQAP. But the Country Team has created a mutually supportive,

5 U.S. Mission to Yemen, FY 2012 Mission Strategic and Resource Plan, Washington DC, April 2010, p. 2.

6 USAID Yemen, Overview of USAID/Yemen Country Strategy 2010-2012, Sana'a Yemen, September 2010.

7 From personal interviews with personnel at U.S. Central Command and U.S. Special Operations Command, December 2010.

8 USAID Yemen, Transition Initiatives, Sana'a, Yemen, June 2010.

whole of government approach that maximizes the opportunities for success. This kind of integrated approach can be used worldwide. Agencies can, and should, expect their representatives to work directly with, and in support, of their interagency partners in a seamless manner. That expectation can help make this approach more systemic and less personality dependent.

Colonel Kazimierz "Kaz" Kotlow, USA is currently a visiting Senior Service College Fellow at The Washington Institute. Most recently, he served as the Defense and Army Attache at the U.S. Embassy in Yemen, a post he previously held at the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon. Colonel Kotlow also deployed as a political/military advisor to the Multinational Force (MNF) Commander, III Corps, in Baghdad, Iraq. Prior to his postings as a Foreign Area Officer, Colonel Kotlow served as a Special Forces detachment commander, deploying multiple times to Eritrea and Kuwait to train host nation forces in infantry operations and demining. The views expressed herein are his own.

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2011, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our [Terms of Use](#).

No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.



Please consider [supporting Small Wars Journal](#).