



# OIG HIGHLIGHTS

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## What OIG Inspected

OIG conducted this evaluation in Baghdad, Iraq, from October 18, 2015, to November 10, 2015.

## What OIG Recommended

OIG made recommendations to U.S. Embassy Baghdad to include public diplomacy in its Integrated Country Strategy action plan and to complete a Public Diplomacy Implementation Plan for FY 2016.

~~SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED~~

March 2016

OIG Office of Inspections

Evaluation of Embassy Baghdad's Implementation of Line of Effort 6 in the President's Strategy to Counter ISIL: Exposing ISIL's True Nature

## What OIG Found

- Embassy Baghdad's public diplomacy activities operate without formal strategic planning and goals. None of the embassy's Integrated Country Strategy goals or objectives contain language relating to public diplomacy generally or to counter-Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant messaging, specifically.
- The Department did not formally task Embassy Baghdad with specific actions under Line of Effort 6 in the counter-Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant strategy.
- The embassy focuses counter-Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant messaging on building confidence among Iraqis that the Iraqi Security Forces, with U.S. and Coalition support, can degrade and defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. This approach involves highlighting Iraqi Security Force battlefield gains and Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant setbacks, and underscoring U.S and Coalition assistance to those efforts.
- Embassy Baghdad is focusing more resources on social media. The embassy's Facebook page expanded its audience by almost 40 percent between January and October 2015, beginning with about 250,000 followers and growing to more than 400,000.
- The embassy confronts active disinformation campaigns and residual suspicions about U.S. policy that undermine its messaging. Recent Department polling shows that about 40 percent of Iraqis believe that the United States is working to destabilize Iraq and control its natural resources and nearly a third believe that America supports terrorism in general or the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, specifically. About half of Iraqi Sunnis and Shia now say that they completely oppose the Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.

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# Evaluation of Embassy Baghdad's Implementation of Line of Effort 6 in the President's Strategy to Counter ISIL: Exposing ISIL's True Nature

## BUREAU OF NEAR EASTERN AFFAIRS

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## CONTEXT

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“Ultimately, however, it is not going to be enough to defeat ISIL in the battlefield. We have to prevent it from radicalizing, recruiting and inspiring others to violence in the first place. And this means defeating their ideology. Ideologies are not defeated with guns, they’re defeated by better ideas—a more attractive and compelling vision.”

—President Obama at the Leaders’ Summit on Countering ISIL and Violent Extremism, United Nations Headquarters, New York, NY. September 29, 2015

On September 10, 2014, President Obama announced a counterterrorism strategy consisting of nine lines of effort (LOEs) “to degrade and ultimately destroy” the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The sixth LOE is “exposing ISIL’s true nature.” In a speech on October 15, 2014, the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, General John Allen, identified “confronting and contesting ISIL’s messaging” as the main activity of this LOE and characterized the “information battlefield” as one of the three main theaters in which the overall counter-ISIL war is being waged. The Department’s Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs leads the whole-

of-government implementation of this LOE.

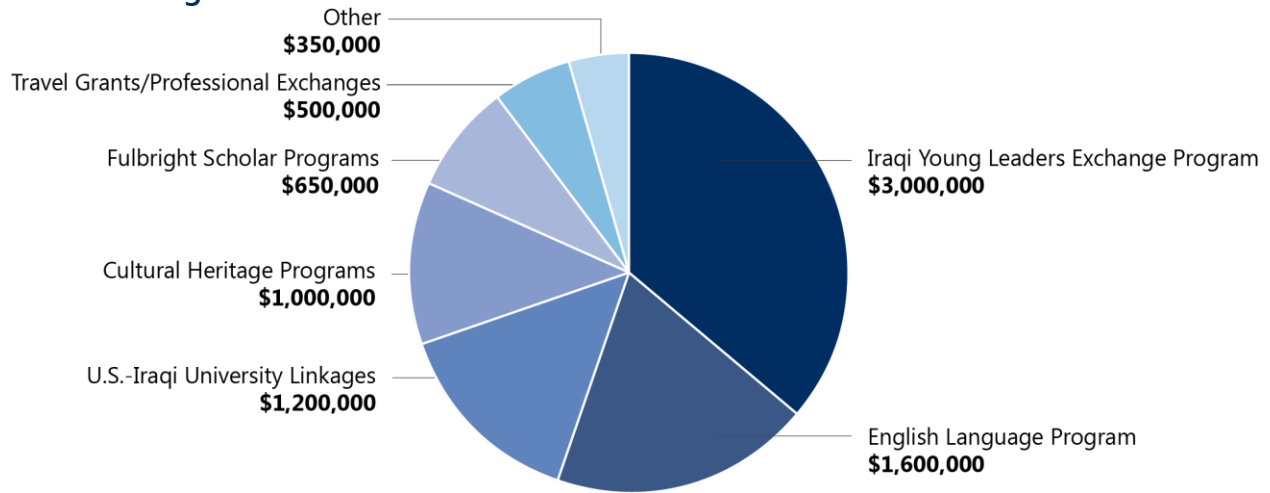
In addition to its core counter-ISIL messaging component, LOE 6 has a complementary focus on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), defined by the White House as programmatic interventions that build awareness, counter extremist narratives, and promote community-based alternatives to radicalization in order to undermine the attraction of extremist movements and ideologies that seek to promote violence.

In FY 2015, Embassy Baghdad’s Public Affairs Section (PAS) had a budget of \$10.67 million, primarily funded by the Overseas Contingency Operations account—the third-largest public diplomacy budget in the world, after Afghanistan and Pakistan, respectively. Following ISIL incursions into Iraq in June 2014, the embassy reduced PAS staffing from 10 U.S. direct-hire officers to 3. During the following year, PAS gradually restored some positions until reaching the current level of 6 U.S. direct hires, 14 locally employed staff members, 4 third country nationals, 1 contractor, and 2 eligible family members in Baghdad. In Basrah, PAS staffing includes one U.S. direct-hire, one Regional English Language Officer, and three locally employed staff members. In Erbil, staffing includes one U.S. direct-hire and six locally employed staff members.

PAS estimated that it spent about 5 percent of the public diplomacy budget on activities that directly supported counter-ISIL messaging. That figure included the salaries of the seven locally employed and third country national staff members dedicated to press and messaging activities. PAS directed approximately 78 percent of its budget—\$8.3 million—to educational and cultural exchange programs, as outlined in the chart in Figure 1 below. The remainder of the budget went to salaries for the locally employed staff, third country national employees, and other operational expenses.

Figure: 1 Public Diplomacy Grants Budget

**\$8.3 Million FY 2015 Public Diplomacy Grants Budget: Focused on Educational and Cultural Programs**



Source: Embassy Baghdad

## OBJECTIVE

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OIG undertook this evaluation to assess Embassy Baghdad’s implementation of LOE 6. This report was completed in accordance with OIG’s oversight responsibilities, as described in Section 8L of the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended. OIG also conducted concurrent evaluations of Embassy Baghdad’s implementation of diplomatic engagement in support of LOE 1 and Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor foreign assistance programs conducted in support of LOE 1. These LOE 1 evaluations will be reported separately, in a classified and an unclassified report, respectively.

### Nine Lines of Effort in the President’s Strategy to Counter ISIL

- LOE 1: Supporting Effective Governance in Iraq
- LOE 2: Denying ISIL Safe-Haven
- LOE 3: Building Partner Capacity
- LOE 4: Enhancing Intelligence Collection
- LOE 5: Disrupting ISIL’s Finances
- LOE 6: Exposing ISIL’s True Nature**
- LOE 7: Disrupting the Flow of Foreign Fighters
- LOE 8: Protecting the Homeland
- LOE 9: Humanitarian Support

## COUNTER-ISIL MESSAGING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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The Department’s Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) is the principal Department entity responsible for LOE 6 implementation. CSCC develops online content and coordinates interagency counterterrorism communications aimed at foreign audiences.

The Department's Bureau of International Information Programs develops and curates online content aimed at foreign publics on themes of U.S. policy, society, and values for use by overseas public affairs sections.

The Broadcasting Board of Governors operates independently under its journalistic mandate to provide objective news and information programming to Iraq, supportive of LOE 6. Its Middle East Broadcasting Network operates three broadcast/internet platforms aimed specifically at Iraqi audiences: TV-Alhurra-Iraq, Radio Sawa-Iraq, and Voice of America's Kurdish service.

Embassy Baghdad's PAS is responsible for coordinating mission-wide media outreach to the Iraqi public as well as the embassy's educational, cultural, and exchange programs. It has lead responsibility in Iraq for informational and programmatic activities that support LOE 6.

U.S. Central Command works closely with CSCC and Embassy Baghdad on messaging that is regionally directed and Iraq-specific. The U.S.-led Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, formed in October 2014, coordinates operations from the more than 60 countries in the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL.

### **U.S. Government Focused on Coalition Messaging**

The U.S. Government has promoted a multilateral approach to LOE 6. The Department co-chairs the Working Group on Counter-Messaging for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. Iraq—a Coalition partner—did not participate in the Counter-Messaging Working Group during its initial months but—with strong encouragement from Embassy Baghdad and the Department—was doing so by summer 2015.

## POLICY AND PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

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### **No Specific Guidance on “Exposing ISIL’s True Nature”**

The Department did not formally task Embassy Baghdad with specific actions under the LOE 6 counter-ISIL strategy. The National Security Council developed an action plan for LOE 6 in late 2014 that the White House approved at the Deputies Committee level.<sup>1</sup> The action plan mapped out interagency roles and responsibilities on LOE 6 but did not directly task any actions at the embassy level. The Department, through the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA) and the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy, retained the discretion to decide what specific LOE 6 public diplomacy actions, if any, might be assigned to Embassy Baghdad. NEA produced a one-page action plan for the Coalition’s Counter-Messaging Working Group but did not develop a corresponding action plan for Embassy Baghdad or other embassies in the region. NEA stated that they refrained from tasking Embassy Baghdad with specific LOE 6 requirements because of its security and staffing limitations. Specifically, the embassy’s reduction of personnel in June 2014 in response to security concerns limited the ability of public diplomacy staff to conduct normal business. Neither NEA nor the embassy developed formal strategic guidance for public diplomacy programs in Iraq after the announcement of the President’s counter-ISIL strategy in September 2014.

In the months following the rollout of the President’s counter-ISIL strategy, a consensus emerged among the U.S. Government elements charged with implementing LOE 6 that “exposing ISIL’s true nature” was no longer the most urgent and appropriate focus for counter-ISIL messaging, especially in the case of frontline states such as Iraq, where ISIL aggressively promoted its own brutal acts. Interagency review during 2015 led to a reframing of the LOE 6 scope from “exposing” the nature of ISIL to “eroding” its support and image. Although not formally approved as of October 2015, lead Department elements, such as the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs and CSCC, adopted the new formulation as the basis for LOE 6 efforts.

### **Limited Strategic Planning for Messaging and Public Diplomacy**

#### ***Public Diplomacy Not Included in Integrated Country Strategy***

Embassy Baghdad’s public diplomacy activities operate without formal strategic planning and goals. None of the Embassy’s Integrated Country Strategy (ICS) goals or objectives contains

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<sup>1</sup> The Deputies Committee of the National Security Council consists of representatives of the Office of the President; the Director of National Intelligence; the Departments of State, Defense, the Treasury, Homeland Security, Justice, and Energy; and the U.S. Representative to the United Nations, generally at the level of Deputy Secretary or equivalent. The Deputies Committee focuses attention on policy implementation and the Administration’s major foreign policy initiatives.

language relating to public diplomacy, generally, or to counter-ISIL messaging, specifically. The Department requires each embassy to prepare an ICS that articulates mission goals and objectives through coordinated planning among U.S. Government agencies and which in turn forms the basis for performance management and resource requests. Each ICS objective should include an action plan that outlines the means and tools, including public diplomacy, by which the embassy will pursue and track progress toward the objective. According to Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs guidance, public affairs officers are expected to be active participants in their mission's process to draft, implement, and update the ICS and to ensure that public diplomacy is clearly visible and appropriately integrated into every mission policy priority. In the absence of formal inclusion of public diplomacy in the ICS action plan, embassies may miss opportunities to apply public diplomacy tools and programs to shape the host public opinion environment and influence key leadership attitudes in ways more favorable to desired U.S. policy outcomes.

**Recommendation 1:** Embassy Baghdad should include public diplomacy in its Integrated Country Strategy's action plan. (Action: Embassy Baghdad)

### ***Embassy Baghdad Did Not Develop a Public Diplomacy Implementation Plan***

PAS has not developed a Public Diplomacy Implementation Plan (PDIP) or its companion, a Public Diplomacy Country Context paper. According to NEA personnel, ISIL's security incursions and the 2014 reduction in PAS personnel disrupted the embassy's long-term planning for public diplomacy programs. The PDIP is an annual strategic planning tool to link public diplomacy audiences, programs, and activities with ICS goals and objectives. In FY 2014 and FY 2015, the Department made PDIP implementation voluntary rather than mandatory for NEA posts. For FY 2016, the Department required that all embassies prepare a PDIP. The PDIP is useful for a program environment like Iraq, because it allows for continual updating to reflect fast-changing operational conditions and policy developments. Without a PDIP or other planning document, PAS Baghdad operates without a formal strategic framework that prioritizes resource allocation, links public diplomacy programs to embassy goals, and clearly identifies the target audiences for those activities.

**Recommendation 2:** Embassy Baghdad should complete a Public Diplomacy Implementation Plan for FY 2016. (Action: Embassy Baghdad)

### **Embassy Baghdad Reframed Line of Effort 6 to Reflect Bilateral Context**

In Washington, the Department focused on eroding ISIL's credibility by developing online content for foreign audiences worldwide. Embassy Baghdad also determined that the initial framing of LOE 6 was not relevant for an Iraqi public already keenly aware of ISIL's true nature and reframed its messaging to reflect the bilateral context. Department polling shows that nearly all Iraqis have unfavorable views of ISIL and oppose its goals and tactics, with no significant variation across religious sects and ethnic groups. Iraq, as the only large Shia-majority Arab country, requires a distinct counter-ISIL messaging approach; content appropriate for the region's Sunni-majority countries may not be appropriate in Iraq. The large Kurdish minority



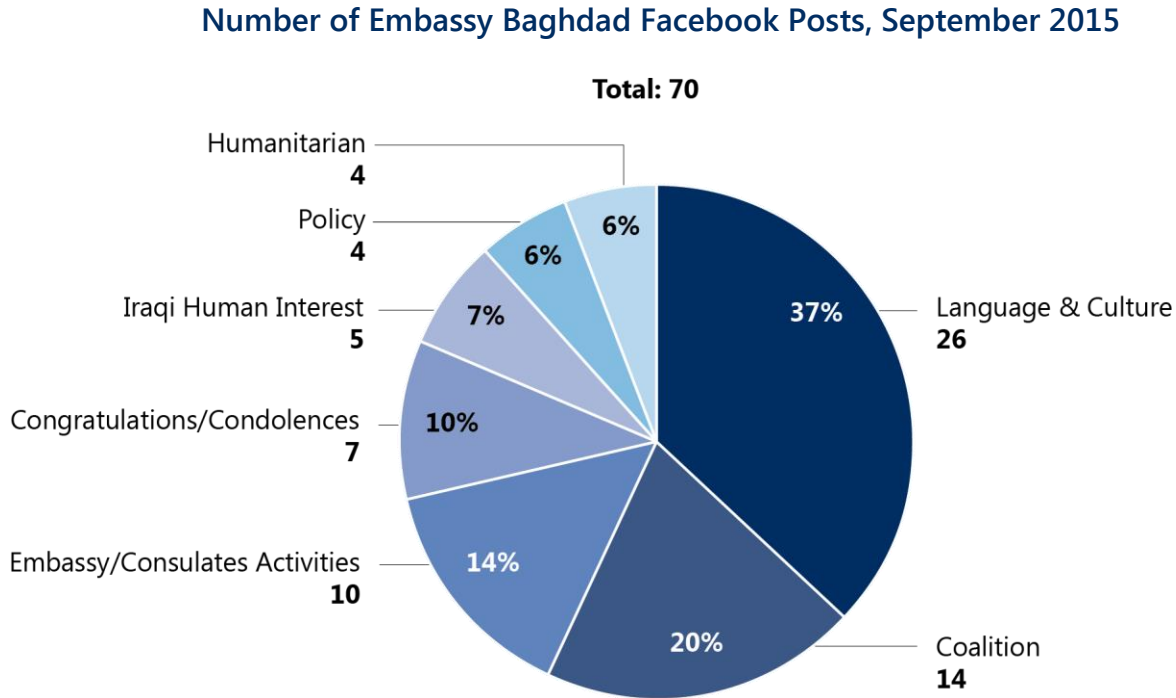
represents yet another important audience. Each of these three core audiences filters information through a distinct sectarian perspective. U.S. Government policy supports a unified and pluralistic Iraq, meaning that messages need to have an inclusive tone that works for each audience. Unlike others in the national and regional arena whose interests are openly partisan, the embassy cannot tailor messages for maximum resonance to any single segment of the population.

The embassy also confronts active disinformation campaigns and residual suspicions about U.S. policy that undermine its messaging. Recent Department polling shows that about 40 percent of Iraqis believe that the United States is working to destabilize Iraq and control its natural resources and nearly a third believe that America supports terrorism in general or ISIL specifically—themes that the embassy stated receive considerable play in the Iraqi media. The U.S. image among Iraqis has fallen from 38 percent favorable in December 2014 to 18 percent in August 2015. The drop is greater among Sunni Arabs, from 54 percent down to 10 percent. Support for the counter-ISIL Coalition has also declined significantly. About half of Iraqi Sunnis and Shia now say that they completely oppose the Coalition. Opposition among the Kurds has remained low and stable, at around 6 percent.

Rather than expose ISIL's true nature, the embassy and U.S. agencies shared the view that, as events had developed, the more pressing messaging task in Iraq was to counter an emerging narrative that ISIL's battlefield success was unstoppable. Reframing LOE 6 through that prism, the embassy focuses counter-ISIL messaging on building confidence among Iraqis that the Iraqi Security Forces—with U.S. and Coalition support—can degrade and defeat ISIL. This approach involves highlighting Iraqi Security Force battlefield gains and ISIL setbacks, and underscoring U.S and Coalition assistance to those efforts. The Ambassador successfully advocated for a senior military officer to serve as the embassy's Coalition spokesperson. Through his regular press engagements, the spokesperson has increased the embassy's ability to communicate battlefield developments and Coalition support of the Iraqi Security Forces.

PAS began in October 2015 to produce short video clips of the Coalition spokesperson's press comments to highlight his top-line messages. Coalition air strike videos are among the embassy's most frequently viewed counter-ISIL content, according to PAS social media engagement statistics. OIG's review of 70 Embassy Baghdad Facebook posts during September 2015 found that air strike videos and similar video- and text-based content focused on Coalition actions against ISIL comprised 20 percent of all content posted for the month (see chart in Figure 2 below).

Figure. 2 Embassy Baghdad Facebook Posts



Source: OIG Analysis of Embassy Baghdad Data

***Social Media Key Battleground for Counter-ISIL Messaging***

ISIL’s active use of social media has been central to its ability to build momentum and attract foreign fighters. According to Department and Broadcasting Board of Governors analysis, the internet is catching up with television as a source of news for Iraqis, particularly among younger, better-educated males. Almost half of Iraqis say they use the internet or social media for news. Facebook is by far the most popular social media platform, used by almost all Iraqis who access social media.

Embassy Baghdad is focusing more resources on social media. During the last year, PAS added an Assistant Information Officer U.S. direct-hire position and a locally employed staff position to focus on social media. PAS recently acquired the Department’s licensed social media management software to track the impact and reach of its social media content. Consulate General Erbil started its own Facebook page in July 2015, providing the embassy with a new platform for Kurdish-language messaging.

Embassy Baghdad’s Facebook page expanded its audience by 40 percent between January and October 2015, beginning with about 250,000 followers and growing to more than 400,000. According to the embassy’s tracking statistics, Baghdad’s Facebook site is currently the second-most popular among all U.S. embassies in the NEA region after Embassy Cairo and has the region’s highest level of engagement (as measured by the percentage of likes/shares/comments

per post). PAS re-posts Facebook counter-ISIL content from CSCC and the Sawab Center<sup>2</sup>, balanced by softer, less policy-centric content on aspects of American society, education, and culture, often drawn from the Bureau of International Information Program's Share America site.

"ISIL has far outpaced al-Qa'ida in its prolific use and mastery of social media. Whereas al-Qa'ida relied mainly on videos that had to be smuggled to Al-Jazeera or other television networks to reach mass audiences, ISIL sympathizers can follow Twitter accounts or YouTube channels and have immediate access to information, videos, songs, and depictions of life in ISIL-held territories." *U.S. Government Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy 2015 Annual Report*

### ***Embassy Messaging Efforts Are Well Coordinated at Tactical Level***

Embassy Baghdad establishes messaging priorities and approaches through regular coordination meetings, including a weekly "mission messaging meeting" hosted by the Ambassador. These meetings guide day-to-day decision making on messaging tactics and content. PAS chairs a twice-weekly interagency coordination meeting to review messaging and the embassy's "advise and assist" work with Iraqi Government media spokespersons. PAS staff and Department of Defense colleagues in Baghdad participate in a twice-weekly CSCC International Coordination Cell working group. The PAS Information Officer participates in U.S. Central Command's weekly Operation Inherent Resolve Planning/Synch Call.

### ***Iraqi Government Press Professionals Capacity Building***

The embassy has established productive working relationships with Government of Iraq press professionals and invests in building their capacity to support LOE 6 objectives. PAS sent 12 Government of Iraq spokespersons for media training at the Department's Bureau of Public Affairs Media Hub in Dubai in April-May 2015. On September 30, 2015, the Deputy Chief of Mission hosted a luncheon for 25 key Government of Iraq press officials to meet the newly arrived senior PAS officers and Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve spokesperson.

### ***Cultural Heritage Preservation and the Fight against ISIL***

U.S. Government support for Iraqi antiquities preservation, heritage, and tourism efforts presents a stark contrast to ISIL's destruction of cultural patrimony. PAS grants in FY 2015 supporting this

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<sup>2</sup> On July 8, 2015, the United States and the United Arab Emirates launched The Sawab Center, the first-ever multinational online messaging and engagement program, in support of the Global Coalition Against ISIL. The Sawab Center uses direct online engagement to counter terrorist propaganda.

area totaled \$1 million, channeled primarily through the Iraqi Institute for the Conservation of Antiquities and Heritage. These programs receive positive coverage in Iraqi media. U.S. partnership with the Government of Iraq to support cultural heritage dates back to the cultural and educational chapters of U.S.-Iraqi Strategic Framework Agreement of 2008.

### **Limited Countering Violent Extremism Programming**

Security constraints limit PAS's ability to support a full range of CVE programs, which are normally developed at the local community level. The Department provides worldwide rather than country-specific guidance on CVE programs. In the case of public diplomacy activities, each embassy determines the extent to which they will develop programs in this area, if any. PAS direct support of CVE objectives was limited to Invitational Travel and Short-Term Professional Exchanges.

PAS funded travel for mission contacts to attend and participate in special events that supported the counter-ISIL agenda, including participation in President Obama's CVE Summits held in Washington, DC, in February 2015 and in New York in September 2015. PAS sponsored the travel for an Iraqi participant at the Department's July 2015 Trafficking in Persons Hero conference, providing a platform for her to detail ISIL atrocities against Yazidi men, women, and children. PAS coordinated with the Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs on several short-term professional exchange programs that supported Counter-ISIL/CVE goals, picking up the costs of the international travel in most cases. One of these exchanges—a visit to the United States in January 2015 by a delegation of provincial Sunni leaders—was intended to serve as a symbol of the U.S. Government's commitment to Sunni inclusion in the fight against ISIL. In March 2015, another short-term exchange program for six community leaders focused on grassroots efforts to prevent violent extremism. PAS spent approximately \$70,000 on travel costs supporting these FY 2015 CVE-themed activities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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**Recommendation 1:** Embassy Baghdad should include public diplomacy in its Integrated Country Strategy's action plan. (Action: Embassy Baghdad)

**Recommendation 2:** Embassy Baghdad should complete a Public Diplomacy Implementation Plan for FY 2016. (Action: Embassy Baghdad)

## APPENDIX A: PURPOSE, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

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This inspection was conducted in accordance with the Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation, as issued in 2012 by the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency, and the Inspector's Handbook, as issued by OIG for the Department and the Broadcasting Board of Governors.

### Purpose and Scope

The Office of Inspections provides the Secretary of State, the Chairman of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, and Congress with systematic and independent evaluations of the operations of the Department and the Broadcasting Board of Governors. Inspections cover three broad areas, consistent with Section 209 of the Foreign Service Act of 1980:

- Policy Implementation: whether policy goals and objectives are being effectively achieved; whether U.S. interests are being accurately and effectively represented; and whether all elements of an office or mission are being adequately coordinated.
- Resource Management: whether resources are being used and managed with maximum efficiency, effectiveness, and economy and whether financial transactions and accounts are properly conducted, maintained, and reported.
- Management Controls: whether the administration of activities and operations meets the requirements of applicable laws and regulations; whether internal management controls have been instituted to ensure quality of performance and reduce the likelihood of mismanagement; whether instance of fraud, waste, or abuse exist; and whether adequate steps for detection, correction, and prevention have been taken.

### Methodology

In conducting inspections, the inspectors review pertinent records; as appropriate, circulate, review, and compile the results of survey instruments; conduct on-site interviews; and review the substance of the report and its findings and recommendations with offices, individuals, organizations, and activities affected by this review.

For this evaluation, the team reviewed Embassy Baghdad's strategic planning and resource allocation processes. OIG reviewed whether the Department had communicated clear goals for messaging programs in Iraq through front channel cables or other formal guidance and instructions to post. OIG reviewed the embassy's activities pursuant to this line of effort, and the performance results of those activities. To assess total levels of Department funding associated with counterterrorism messaging programs in Iraq, OIG reviewed the mission's public diplomacy program budget along with other Department-funded programs that support counterterrorism messaging objectives, and determined the percentage of the mission's public affairs budget that is directed to messaging activities in Iraq.

To accomplish inspection objectives, OIG requested information from stakeholder bureaus and offices in Washington, supplemented by personal interviews. In Baghdad, OIG interviewed personnel in Embassy Baghdad and reviewed documents pertaining to the Embassy Baghdad PAS operation.

## ABBREVIATIONS

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CSCC	Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
ICS	Integrated Country Strategy
LOE	Line of Effort
NEA	Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs
PAS	Public Affairs Section
PDIP	Public Diplomacy Implementation Plan



## OIG INSPECTION TEAM MEMBERS

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