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J Family Efforts to Counter Violent Extremism through Interfaith Outreach

The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) works internationally with governments and civil society, including religious communities, to promote tolerance, freedom of religion, and freedom of expression as a means to counter violent extremism (CVE). Direct engagement with Muslim leaders and interfaith outreach serves to counter intolerance and to elicit the rejection of violence and extremism.

To support this engagement, DRL manages approximately \$10 million in assistance funds dedicated to religious freedom and interfaith dialogue, many of which specifically address violent extremism. One such program analyzes the content of Saudi textbooks and associated curricula as well as the global dispersion of these materials in regions prone to violent extremism, from Mali and the Horn of Africa, to Pakistan and Indonesia. The study's findings will be an important tool in pushing the Saudis to remove curriculum that encourages violent extremism and to initiate curriculum reform in places where Saudi textbooks are used. Under this same program, a DRL grantee is conducting professional development training for madrassa instructors in Pakistan to equip them with pedagogical tools that encourage critical thinking and directly challenge extremist ideologies.

DRL is working to develop similar programs to be adopted by Saudi Arabia's International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Vienna, which opened in November 2012. The Centre may become a venue to support a Saudi initiative to reform its curriculum around the world, and we are exploring opportunities to involve the UAE's International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism and other organizations in this initiative. In Pakistan, DRL is collaborating with Embassy Islamabad's community engagement office to curb intolerance in the educational system, counter extremist media narratives that advocate violence against religious minorities, and increase support for religious leader engagement and community policing efforts.

A DRL-funded program convenes respected religious leaders from across the Middle East to directly confront extremist ideologies by establishing religious warrants for a notion of "citizenship" that entitles all citizens, regardless of faith, to equal rights, privileges, and protection. This compliments another DRL program that works directly with the Syrian Opposition Council (SOC) and a broad spectrum of Syria-based religious leaders to build an interfaith council tasked with preventing sectarian conflict, facilitating dispute resolution and reconciliation, and

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advancing humanitarian assistance. [REDACTED] agreed to personally participate in the formation of this council.

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DRL also funds a grant that monitors, documents, and supports Arab and Muslim reformists who speak out against anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial across the Muslim world. These themes are prevalent in most violent extremist ideologies and are perpetuated by many governments around the world. The grant produces publically available research on anti-Semitic trends. The Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism's and the Special Representative for Muslim Communities' social media-based campaign, *Hours Against Hate*, engages youth and religious leaders around the world to promote tolerance.

DRL spearheads U.S. government efforts to implement UN Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18, adopted in March 2011 and aimed at promoting freedom of religion and expression through positive action to defend minorities from violence and discrimination, rather than through government restrictions on expression. By driving 16/18 efforts, with support from [REDACTED], we reinforced the notion that violence is an unacceptable response to acts of intolerance or discrimination. Such protections are inextricably linked to the protections of other civil and political rights necessary for pluralistic societies that are anathema to violent extremism.

DRL engages a wide range of contacts both domestically and internationally on moderating reaction to perceived Islamophobia that extremists and terrorists exploit. For example, DRL reached out to more than 120 individuals and organizations on September 11, 2012, to elicit public statements that discouraged violent reactions to the *Innocence of Muslims* video. Several dozen groups around the world made statements, including prominent Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and interfaith groups and leaders, including in the Muslim world.

DRL also coordinates with J family and regional bureaus, ECA, and IIP to engage moderate religious leaders and encourage collaboration to discourage violence and promote development as a means of countering violent extremism. DRL collaborates in Nigeria with a prominent Muslim and Christian Pastor who run an interfaith mediation center to combat violence and extremism. In conjunction with CSO, DRL convened a meeting with American Buddhist and Muslim leaders to develop strategies to quell religious tensions between Muslims and Buddhists in Rakhine State, Burma. Under Secretaries Otero and Sonenshine represent the Department on the International Religious Engagement Interagency Policy Committee chaired by Deputy National Security Advisor Rhodes, which seeks to

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better coordinate engagement of religious leaders on several lines of effort, including CVE.