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Strategies for Social Media Engagement with Extremists

Know When to Respond

- Decide if responding to a hostile comment is an opportunity to correct misinformation and/or effectively influence audience opinion.
- In some rare cases, a commenter simply wants to start an argument and it is better to ignore the comment than draw attention to it.
- Delete threatening or other comments that violate the State Department Terms of Use. Report threats to the RSO.

Understand the Goal of the Interaction

- The real goal is not necessarily to convert the commenter, but to reach the silent readers who may be influenced by the commenter or by your response.
- Expose errors of fact and logic and cast doubt on the validity of the commenter's reasoning.
- Allow readers to make the appropriate conclusions about your well-reasoned arguments when seen in juxtaposition to the vitriol of critics.
- Point out the overall positive balance in the USG's foreign interactions, for example, by focusing on U.S. assistance to or collaboration with the country concerned.
- Redirect the conversation to focus attention on the crimes committed by al-Qa'ida and related groups.

Focus and Scope

- Frame discussions in terms of shared values or shared threats.
- When confronted with highly aggressive and detailed comments, focus on the weakest points; it is not necessary to answer every argument point-by-point.
- Use empirical data and established history – rather than emotions – to buttress your arguments. Links to official documents, including declassified documents, can be helpful in countering assertions about U.S. policy or programs.

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- The use of lengthy quotes from official texts should be limited because, for the most part, they were not drafted to reach social media audiences.
- Focus discussions on current and future means of improving any given situation.
- Make use of language that demonstrates your authenticity and connection to readers, including proverbs, common aphorisms and literary analogies if appropriate. Sometimes analogies to cultural and sports figures and events may be helpful.
- Be prepared to acknowledge the grievances of others and to acknowledge that the U.S., like other countries, has experienced failings.
- Exercise extreme caution before engaging in discussions based on subjective interpretations of photographs or videos of uncertain origin.
- Consider any potential gaps between what you say and what the audience actually hears.
- Anticipate how critics might respond to your argument and prepare to address that response if necessary.
- Know the facts. Get relevant background information and know about U.S. and embassy activities that are related to the topic.
- Test and retest messages with local staff for cultural, political, historical, and linguistic context.

What to Avoid:

- Extended official pronouncements
- Dwelling on old grievances
- Guessing or winging it; the USG's credibility depends on avoiding errors of fact, history or policy
- Sarcasm and humor – audiences often consider these inappropriate for an official USG voice
- Using arguments based on religious texts and interpretations
- Putting the U.S. in moral judgment of others
- Explanations based on U.S. interests – underscore mutual interests and win-win outcomes

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- Speaking on behalf of third parties, especially other governments
- Detailed recitation of the arguments or criticisms made by opponents
- Circular debates about details of U.S. policy
- Basing arguments upon personal opinions or unduly inserting personal experiences into the flow of discussion
- Speculation about future or hypothetical situations
- Heated, emotional exchanges; keep it professional, not personal

Examples of Accusations and Suggested Responses

“Al-Qa’ida is an agent of the U.S. government.”

Response: Al-Qa’ida declared war on the U.S. two decades ago, and they have attacked us repeatedly since then.

“The U.S. is at war with Islam and seeks to oppose Muslim governments.”

Response: The U.S. has mutually beneficial partnerships with many predominantly Muslim nations throughout the world. The U.S. is the largest humanitarian donor to the people of Syria. The U.S. has provided substantial aid to Muslim countries hit by natural disasters, including Indonesia, when it was devastated by a tsunami, and Iran and Pakistan after they were hit by earthquakes. In the 1990s, the U.S. protected Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo. If there is a “war against Muslims,” it is being carried out by al-Qa’ida and its affiliates.

“Al-Qa’ida defends Muslims throughout the world.”

Response: Al-Qa’ida relentlessly targets Muslims around the globe. In fact, the overwhelming majority of their victims are Muslims. Through terrorist acts such as suicide bombings, al-Qa’ida is killing Muslims, including women and children, as well as desecrating Muslim history and culture.

“Despite talks about human rights abroad, the U.S. persecutes Muslims at home.”

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Response: Millions of Muslims live and worship in the U.S. peacefully, and more arrive every year. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution protects their religious rights – and those of their fellow citizens and residents. American Muslims are found in every walk of life including politics, academia, business, the arts, law enforcement, and the military.

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