



# Ambassador Nathan A. Sales on the State Department's Role in Countering Violent Extremism

## TRANSCRIPT

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*Please note: This transcript is based off a recording and mistranslations may appear in text. The names of participants in the Audience Q&A have been removed. A video of the event is available: <https://www.hudson.org/events/1563-ambassador-nathan-a-sales-on-the-state-department-s-role-in-countering-violent-extremism52018>*

*Written Remarks Delivered by Ambassador Nathan Sales at the Event*

**NATHAN A. SALES:** Thanks to the Hudson Institute for inviting me to speak about Countering Violent Extremism – a critical counterterrorism tool. We're at a vital moment in our fight against terrorism. We've made extraordinary progress against ISIS on the battlefield over the last year. Nearly all the territory ISIS once controlled in Iraq and Syria has been liberated. This fight wasn't easy. Our partners on the ground fought mile by mile – even house by house – to rid Raqqa and the surrounding Syrian countryside of this threat. Yet our victories on the battlefield are not a permanent solution. At the State Department, we're focused on aligning civilian responses to terrorism with military ones. That's the only way to ensure the lasting defeat of our enemies.

Our civilian efforts include law enforcement tools – prosecuting terrorists, collecting battlefield evidence, and updating laws to more effectively target the threat. We'll need tougher border screening and more robust information sharing – both within governments and among them. We'll need to designate and sanction ISIS affiliates and financiers to cut off the flow of money.

Another key civilian tool is Countering Violent Extremism, or CVE. But I think we need to be more ambitious than its name suggests. In addition to countering the violence, we also need to counter the underlying ideas that give rise to it. ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other terrorist organizations continue to radicalize and recruit. Their messages transcend borders. Over the last twenty years, this call to violence has resonated in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, Europe, and here in the United States. Despite our military success, young men and women across the world are still being convinced to join ISIS and al-Qaeda or carry out attacks in their name. The United States and our partners must persuade them otherwise. We must engage in a contest of ideas.

Today, I'd like to talk about American values and the threat posed to them by terrorist ideology. Then I'll discuss some of our natural allies in this contest, and wrap up by describing what the State Department is doing to promote our values and interests. A contest of ideas is not unique to our fight against terrorism. Throughout history, our conflicts have often had ideological dimensions. During the Cold War, our objective was to contain and then roll back the Soviet empire. But we had to go beyond that. We needed to show that the ideology on which the Soviet system was based was false – that its teachings ran counter to the most basic human desires for freedom and dignity. And so we engaged in the debate through Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and countless other platforms to advance the values we share with our allies and partners. We were out to persuade the world that Soviet ideology was wrong – both morally and as a system of governance. And we succeeded.

Ideas matter. And where we find ideologies that espouse violence, deny freedom, and reject human dignity, we must stand with our partners against these threats to our fundamental values. Winston Churchill put it best: "Arms ... are not sufficient by themselves. We must add to them the power of ideas. People say we ought not to allow ourselves to be drawn into a theoretical antagonism between Nazidom and democracy; but the antagonism is here now. It is this very conflict of spiritual and moral ideas which gives the free countries a great part of their strength."

So, what are the competing ideologies in today's contest of ideas? America is committed to individual rights, and we recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every human being. We are all, in the words of the Declaration of Independence, endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. From this we derive a number of specific values. We're committed to religious liberty – our first freedom. This is not just, as some would have it, a mere "freedom of worship." Our Constitution guarantees us the free exercise of religion – conduct as well as expression. We're also dedicated to the notion of equality before the law. We fought a civil war for this principle, and then we implanted it in our Constitution in the form of the Fourteenth Amendment.

We're committed to pluralism. We acknowledge that our fellow citizens will often disagree with us on great questions of morality and religion. We're okay with that. And we expect our government to be okay with it too. We deny officials any authority to mandate uniformity of thought. Here's how the Supreme Court put it in a WWII-era case: "If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion, or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein." These rights and liberties are the entitlement of every American, no matter their background, no matter their creed.

Let me tell you about *Holt v. Hobbs*, a Supreme Court case from 2015 that nicely illustrates our national commitment to liberty, equality, and pluralism. Gregory Holt, an inmate in Arkansas, wanted to grow a half-inch beard, which he believed was required of him as an observant Muslim. Prison guards barred him from doing so, citing the state's penal regulations. He filed suit, and the U.S. Department of Justice took his side, defending his right to freely exercise his religion. The Supreme Court's decision was unanimous. It held that Gregory Holt was entitled to an exemption from the ban on facial hair. Arkansas' interest in prison discipline had to yield to the inmate's right to religious liberty.

Our adversaries reject all of this. ISIS and al-Qaeda deny the worth and dignity of the individual. Here's how Osama bin Laden once put it: "We love death. The U.S. loves life. That is the big difference between us." Indeed it is. Today, we see the toll this bloody ideology is exacting on the world. It's responsible for the deaths of countless Iraqis and Syrians, approximately 100,000 Afghans, and, on 9/11, close to 3,000 people from over 90 countries. Its followers have enslaved women and girls from their families. They've beheaded sons on television. They've burned people alive, thrown them from the tops of buildings, and drowned them. Our enemies are not shy about the ideas that inspire this brutality. Our enemies reject religious liberty – indeed all liberty – as they seek to rule by constant bloodshed. They reject equality and seek to empower themselves at the expense of those they regard as their inferiors. And they reject pluralism because they regard any other religion – indeed, any other tradition within Islam itself – as a crime punishable by death. And so as we confront terrorists on the battlefield, in courts of law, and in other theaters, we also must confront the twisted ideas they use to justify their barbarism.

We have allies in this effort. We need to work with partners who share our values and who can credibly refute the violence, supremacism, and intolerance of our enemies. We need to partner with government officials, but also with community leaders, religious figures, and others who have the standing to counter terrorist ideology. Luckily, it's easy to find partners like these. I've met many of them since I took office less than a year ago. Let me give you a few examples.

Southeast Asia is no stranger to terrorism. Last year, we saw ISIS seize a city in the Philippines. And earlier this month, terrorists carried out a series of attacks on churches and a police station in Surabaya, Indonesia. I recently met with Indonesians who are working hard to counter terrorist ideology in their country, and across the entire region. Indonesia is a potent antidote to extremism. It's home to the largest Muslim population in the world, and it boasts a long history of religious tolerance and pluralism. Last year, a group of students in Indonesia published an 8,000-word "Declaration on Humanitarian Islam" that reflects the best of their country's traditions. Their agenda focuses on three priority areas. They want to increase religious understanding and mutual respect, emphasizing what they term the "humane and spiritual dimensions" of their faith. They want to promote critical thinking skills. And they want to empower civil society to deter extremism. It's voices like these that must be amplified. They share the values America holds dear, and they're critical partners in our effort to defeat terrorist ideology.

Like Indonesia, Jordan is also a center of pluralism. Top Jordanian officials have supported interfaith dialogues that call for peace and tolerance, both within the Islamic community and with other religious groups. They're also tackling the inconsistencies between religious texts hijacked by ISIS and the intellectual and philosophical legacies within Islam. They are scouring scripture to expose the illegitimacy of terrorists' claims from within their own tradition. For example, one Jordanian scholar has said, "A tiny minority of Muslims have fundamentally misunderstood Islam and are grossly misrepresenting it... True piety necessarily involves virtue and kindness towards others – all others – because kindness is the fruit and result of love... We were created to be kind to our neighbors, no matter who they are or what their faith."

Morocco is another partner with a strong commitment to pluralism. To stem the growth of extremism, in 2015 the King established the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams. The Institute also trains male and female religious guides known respectively as "Morchidines" and "Morchidates". Its mission is to promote religious scholarship and a message of tolerance, particularly in Africa. Today, this school attracts students from across the continent – and from Europe as well. A student body of over 1,200 per year hails from Morocco, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Tunisia, Mali, Chad, Nigeria, Senegal, and France. Initiatives like this are growing a cadre of informed and authentic voices that will ultimately drown out the extremism preached by ISIS and al-Qaeda.

So what's the role of the United States in all of this? Candidly, I think we need to approach that question with a healthy dose of modesty. The federal government is not a religious authority – I certainly am not – and there are limits to our ability to disprove our adversaries' theological claims. What we can do is partner with leaders and authorities who share our values.

Let me tell you about what the Counterterrorism Bureau and the State Department generally are doing to support our friends in this contest of ideas. First, we're promoting authentic voices that are committed to pluralism and human rights, and that can speak credibly to those at risk of buying into terrorist ideology. One example is the Sawab Center, a partnership with the United Arab Emirates. "Sawab" is an Arabic word that means "on the right path." The Center develops and disseminates content that challenges ISIS narratives. Recently, it launched an internet campaign on the importance of giving to verified charities; it was viewed over a million times. We've also supported community leaders to develop tailored messages for local audiences. In Southeast Asia, we trained university and high school students to create and share videos on peace, tolerance, and alternatives to terrorism and the ideology behind it. Students learned how to operate a video camera, write a storyboard and script, and edit their work. They then held video screenings and discussions that reached thousands of other students. In another initiative, we supported a documentary by mothers whose sons went to Syria to fight with ISIS. This widely viewed film showed the devastation families experience when their

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sons and daughters abandon them for a life of violence. It forced would-be recruits to think twice about their support for terrorism, and to confront the false ideas that encouraged them in the first place.

Second, we're engaging with the communities most affected by terrorist messaging. Civic leaders are often the first ones to spot the signs of radicalization. They're an early warning system and an early intervention mechanism. When young people are on a path to terrorism, it's important to connect them and their families to religious figures, mentors, and other stakeholders in their communities. They need to hear strong, authentic voices whose messages of non-violence and tolerance will resonate. That's why the CT Bureau supports the Strong Cities Network, which now includes more than 100 cities from around the world. Under the City Pair Program, we've matched cities in the United States with counterparts abroad and encouraged them to share good practices on countering terrorism. These exchanges have produced real results. A few years ago, we paired Vilvoorde, Belgium with Columbus, Ohio. At the time, Vilvoorde, a city just north of Brussels, had one of the highest per capita numbers of foreign terrorist fighters who traveled to Syria and Iraq. The Belgian delegation included Mayor Hans Bonte, the chief of police, and community leaders. In Ohio they met with a number of local figures, including officials from the Hilliard City school district. Hilliard has become one of the most diverse districts in the country, due to a large influx of immigrants from Somalia. Columbus has worked to integrate these kids and build their resilience to harmful outside influences. When he returned to Vilvoorde, Mayor Bonte implemented new community engagement and resilience techniques. A few months later, Vilvoorde noted a precipitous drop in foreign terrorist fighters – down to zero. Vilvoorde is now a member of the Strong Cities Network and Mayor Bonte regularly speaks with mayors around the world about its efforts.

Finally, we're working to deradicalize those who've proved susceptible to terrorist ideology. One of the groups we're focusing on is prisoners. We all know the story of al Qaeda's origins, with Ayman al-Zawahiri and others who were further radicalized in Egyptian prisons. In the past several years, we've seen former prisoners go on to commit attacks in Denmark and Belgium, among other places. And as we prosecute terrorist fighters captured on the battlefield and send them to jail, we need to prevent them from radicalizing their fellow inmates. At the same time, prisons can also present deradicalization opportunities, with inmates cut off from their previous networks and contacts. In Kosovo, for example, we're launching programs to help prison officials manage and rehabilitate terrorist fighters who've returned home and other terrorist offenders. We're helping the Kosovars develop standard operating procedures for managing terrorist inmates, and instructing officers how to monitor their communications and activities.

Of course we can't limit our efforts to prisoners. We also have to reach people before they commit crimes that might land them in jail. That's why we helped create Hedayah, an international training center based in Abu Dhabi. One of Hedayah's most important projects is its counter-narrative library, which includes defector narratives from former terrorists. Many who left ISIS and other groups became disillusioned with them because of their brutality – particularly toward fellow Muslims. Hedayah has used this library to create regional training guides on crafting messages to dissuade would-be terrorists. These narratives demonstrate that wherever terrorist ideology begins to take hold, we can also free people from its clutches.

In conclusion, ISIS is down but it's not out. In Southeast Asia, the Sahel, East Africa, Europe, and South America, the threat of terrorism and the ideas that animate it are very real. And they're growing. Our military victories buy us time to win a more fundamental contest: a contest between competing ideologies. This essential work will require determination and patience. But I'm confident that, with the will and commitment of our partners, our ideas will prevail – just as they have in the past. Thank you for hosting me.

(APPLAUSE)

*Event Transcript*

**ERIC BROWN:** Thank you. We have a bunch of questions from the audience. But I wanted to begin by asking something of you about the rule of law. You have a background as a scholar and as a lawyer. What role do you see the promotion of the rule of law playing in helping to build resilience in societies that are affected by violent extremism?

**SALES:** Well, I think...

**BROWN:** How does the State Department coordinate with other government agencies to promote that?

**SALES:** I think it's a great question. And it's an incredibly important part of the suite of tools we use to confront terrorists and the ideas that animate them. Rule of law instruments can have both tactical benefits and strategic ones. Let me talk a bit about the tactical benefits first. When you catch a terrorist who has committed a crime, a country needs to have the capability to investigate them, to prosecute them, for judges to adjudicate the charges against them, and then, for these inmates upon conviction to be incarcerated properly. So on a tactical level, building rule of law institutions that are capable of doing that is an incredibly important priority. Those efforts also have broader strategic benefits as well, because we're not just talking about courts adjudicating cases. We're talking about a fundamental system of values – that this is the way you deal with disorder and violence and discord within society, not through arbitrary dictates issued by authoritarian governments, but through the rule of law. It's no coincidence that governments that are characterized by high degrees of rule of law commitments display higher levels of resilience to terrorism and to terrorist ideology than other forms of governments. And I think the reason why is fairly intuitive. Democratic systems based upon the rule of law give life to the terrorists' false claim that a resort to violence is necessary to achieve your political objectives. It's never necessary. It's never appropriate to use violence. But in a system that gives citizens multiple outlets for the expression of their concerns and opportunities to seek change, it's even less appropriate.

**BROWN:** I'm so glad that you mentioned GP Ansor's "Declaration on Humanitarian Islam" and a lot of the other projects you had singled out – some of the work being done in Morocco, both by the government as well as by religious leaders there, the work being done in Jordan, and in the UAE. You mentioned that the U.S. government has a role to play in amplifying some of those messages, perhaps providing resources and support. Could you elaborate a little on that? And I take your point about the humility and modesty that the U.S. government needs to have in doing this work. This is not necessarily our fight. But beyond the role of the U.S. government, what can American civil society do? What would government ask from American civil society?

**SALES:** Well, I think the government would ask civil society to perform and behave as civil society does, which is to say not at the direction of the government. That said, private institutions – whether they are academic or religious or otherwise, in the United States and elsewhere that share our national commitments to things like individual liberty, including religious liberty, equality, pluralism, tolerance, respect, organizations in the U.S. and around the world that share those commitments – don't keep your candle under a bushel. These are important voices that can add to the conversation and that can demonstrate the value of our system of government and, underlying that, our set of social norms and values and the illegitimacy, falsity and inferiority of a system of ideas based on compulsion, on violence, on supremacism.

**BROWN:** We had a question apposite that from the audience about the Global Engagement Center. Specifically, is it still active? Is it growing under this administration? And how much of the Global Engagement Center's work focuses on terrorist recruitment via propaganda from countries like Russia and China?

**SALES:** Right. GEC, Global Engagement Center's, a very important partner of ours in the CT bureau. It was originally conceived as a government body that could engage in the development of content and the propagation of content to address terrorist narratives and terrorist ideology. It has an even broader mandate now, as your questioner noted, focusing on other threats to the United States, state-based threats, and disinformation campaigns launched by peer powers or other state-affiliated entities. So GEC is addressing the full range of national security and foreign policy challenges we face. At the top of the list, we find the CVE and counterterrorism issues that we're talking about today.

**BROWN:** And we also had another question about the fight in cyberspace and on social media. There's been a lot of criticism of some American companies, social media companies among other things, about how they serve as a platform for spreading radical ideas and for organization. And sometimes, under criticism, they have been, some critics claim, slow to take down or to dismantle the networks that have been formed on their platforms. Can you give us a sense of how important you see the involvement and the responsible behavior of business is in countering violent extremism?

**SALES:** Certainly. Radicalism and the process of radicalizing take place through a number of different channels. Sometimes it's face-to-face. Sometimes it's online. And we have to be mindful of various different vectors through which

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radicalizing content is disseminated to vulnerable populations, to target audiences. And the online space is obviously a huge part of that. I think Silicon Valley understands that the online space is a huge part of it, and I think they have an interest in their platforms not being seen as synonymous with al-Qaeda or ISIS. Nobody wants to be the platform of choice for Ayman al-Zawahiri. And so in recent years, we've seen them take a number of steps within the industry to sort of rally the industry behind a shared sense of obligation to do more. They founded an organization called GIFCT. I'm going to forget the exact name of it. But it's Global Internet Forum To Counter Terrorism. There, I did it. The point of it is to enable incumbents in the market that have fairly well-developed capabilities to share information and also share techniques with some of the new entrants about how to spot terrorist content, how to take it down, and so on. So we're encouraged by the steps that Silicon Valley is taking, but we're going to continue to encourage them to do more. We're trying to deny physical safe havens for al-Qaeda and ISIS in places like Afghanistan and Syria. We can't allow them to virtual safe havens too.

**BROWN:** Right. We had another question from the audience about careers and what advice you would give to young people who are seeking a career in counterterrorism.

**SALES:** Come work for me (laughter).

**BROWN:** Work for you.

**SALES:** Send an application. Well, I...

**BROWN:** There's another dimension to that question. We're in a long struggle. That's become a mantra, but it's true. We're in a very long struggle. And when you think about how the U.S. government operates and various non-governmental agencies operate, what new capabilities does our government need to compete in this long-term struggle? Where else do we need to make investments in government and out of government to effectively work with our partners around the world?

**SALES:** So I'll answer that question. But let me actually answer the first question first, because it's the sort of thing that, back when I was an academic, I used to get from my students all the time, and I quite enjoy answering it. There's no one path, I think, towards a career working on these issues. And let me just say, you don't have to go work for the State Department, although we'd love to have you, or any other government agency. There are plenty of opportunities to engage on these issues in the private sector, in academia, and at think tanks, like the Hudson Institute. So I think it's simply a matter of remaining current in the literature, coming to events like these and being mindful of unexpected opportunities that will present themselves. And, you know, as an illustration of that, I can offer my own background as an example. I started working on these issues by accident. I was a young lawyer fresh off a clerkship here in Washington, D.C., with a federal judge when I got hired to work on administrative law issues at the Justice Department. This was in August of 2001. And three weeks later, administrative law suddenly seemed a bit less important. So we all had to get very smart on national security and counterterrorism issues pretty quick. And it was just that happenstance of being there at that moment in time that I began to develop an interest and focus on these issues. Of course, we pray that there is never a comparably cataclysmic career shift for anyone in this room or watching on television. But, you know, mindful of those opportunities – or opportunities not like that – to sort of move into a space that you find interesting. Remind me your second question.

**BROWN:** Yeah, the long-term capabilities that we need – I mean, there's been quite a bit of innovation in our government. I think a lot of the innovation has been driven on the military side. We have an enormous amount of talent and expertise in our civilian agencies. I'm not always sure that they've been properly led with the right policies with respect to this issue of CVE. But beyond that, where will the innovation need to come from in the civilian agencies?

**SALES:** Right, OK.

**BROWN:** What new civilian capabilities do we need to more effectively counter violent extremism?

**SALES:** So CVE is part of it. But I think we actually need to use a wider-angle lens to answer that question. One of the sets of tools we need is border security, particularly, information about airline passengers who are traveling to the United States or to and from allied nations. You can't spot terrorists and interdict them at the border unless you know who's coming and going. So one of the things that's very important, I think, is collecting information about inbound and outbound airline travel and then using that data to match it against watchlists of known and suspected terrorists, which leads us to a second thing that other countries need to do a better job of: developing those lists of known and suspected terrorists. In the U.S., we've been doing this since the early post-9/11 era. A number of our partners around the world are following our lead. But we think that it's such a useful instrument, useful tool to spot terrorist travel that other countries need to step up to the plate as well. Biometrics are a third issue. You know, terrorists will try to masquerade, assume new identities. It's a

lot harder to fake your fingerprints. So using biometric identifiers at ports of entry is a really valuable way to verify that the person who's presenting himself as Joe Smith is actually Joe Smith and not an ISIS operative. So that's one suite of tools that I think the United States has been a real leader on and that we're going to be looking for other partners in other countries around the world to do more on. Designations and financial tools is another really critical set of capabilities. You know, we don't just want to stop the bomber. We want to stop the guy, the moneyman who buys the bomb. So working with banks, working with international institutions, working bilaterally with other countries, we need to be imposing sanctions on those individuals and entities that are funneling money to al-Qaeda, to ISIS, to Hezbollah and other entities like that, that pose a threat to us and our friends.

**BROWN:** I'm skipping around here. But if I might go back to the ideological dimensions of the struggle, we have a question about ISIL propaganda these days, which attempts to justify its actions based on appeals to law, to legality, among other things. Do you think that leaders and members of the Islamic State genuinely believe in the principles of accountability and fairness? Or is this rhetoric simply designed to appeal to people for dignity and justice in war-torn societies?

**SALES:** I think you can judge them by their deeds. When you set a man on fire in a cage, you're not concerned about fundamental values like that. When you behead people and boast about it, your values are fundamentally inconsistent with those of the civilized world. So I would judge them by their deeds not their words.

**BROWN:** Another question: how does CVE fit in with the State Department's broader diplomatic mission – particularly in affected parts of the world like the Middle East, which I would argue is experiencing an unprecedented historical, political and ideological convulsion? And we have the largest displacement of humanity since the end of World War II in West Asia. Part of this is connected to the fact that there is a robust geopolitical and strategic competition in the region between Saudi Arabia and Iran, in particular. But beyond that, the convulsions that we've seen have revealed that a lot of countries are very fragile and very weak. The region has known that for some time. But in the tumult that we've seen since the 2011 Arab uprisings, a lot of that fragility has become more and more clear. And it's being exploited by violent extremists. So I guess my question is: how does CVE and your efforts in the Counterterrorism Bureau work with other agencies in State and elsewhere to help build greater resilience in these societies? And where do you see in the Middle East situations of self-sustaining strength, if you will, that can become political models and models of good governance going forward that can help to show that there is a civilized way to construct a future for themselves?

**SALES:** Well, I think you're exactly right that we're living through a very interesting time in that part of the world. But the world is watching Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ambitious reform agenda. Make no mistake, he has articulated and is pursuing a quite ambitious agenda, not just to reform his country's economy and position it to compete on the global stage for decades to come, but more importantly for our purposes today, to also address the ideological components that are important to a struggle against terrorism and also for ensuring the long-term viability of the Saudi system. We're encouraged by some of the steps that the crown prince has taken. As you know, he's announced that women will be allowed to drive for the first time. And the United States applauds these reforms, and we look forward to continuing to see the progress that will be made in the region.

**BROWN:** We have another question from the audience, which is dear to a lot of us here at Hudson Institute. What does the U.S. government do when non-democratic governments try to secure U.S. help or approval for suppression of what they call terrorists or extremists, who are in fact nothing more than peaceful critics or religious or ethnic minorities, an example being the Uyghurs of Xinjiang in China?

**SALES:** Well, when governments try to enlist us to help them, they don't get it. So let me take a step back and sort of lay out the big picture before answering the details of that question. Since 9/11, the United States has worked hard with other partners to establish a rough global consensus that terrorism is always and everywhere illegitimate. Now, the boundaries of that norm are a bit fuzzy, but I don't think there's any question that that norm exists.

Now, that creates great opportunities for the United States and for like-minded countries that share our interests and share our values to cooperate together, to build alliances and coalitions around that principle of countering terrorism. It also creates opportunities for our adversaries to use pretextual justifications, to say, "Well, this is really terrorism," when in fact it's simply a matter of a domestic group seeking to exercise the sorts of rights and liberties that we in the United States experience every day and are grateful for. So we are always aware of the potential for counterterrorism as an important priority to be hijacked by other governments that have ulterior motives, and we don't participate in that. In a slightly more granular level, there are provisions in federal law that prohibit us from providing assistance to countries who have a poor track record when it comes to respecting human rights, have a history of committing abuses, including against domestic dissidents. So the Leahy Law, for instance, requires us to very thoroughly vet the recipients of U.S. federal assistance dollars to make sure that the American taxpayer is not subsidizing brutality.

**BROWN:** Right. We had a question as well about the role of CVE in war-torn places like Syria and Iraq, particularly in the context of the Counter-ISIS Coalition. I mean, what role does CVE play in places where governance has failed, and war and terrorism has come to those areas? What role is your office playing in those areas?

**SALES:** Well, you know, it's certainly one of the important objectives. The most immediate objective, the most tactical need, is to roll back the false caliphate, the physical occupation of cities, of countrysides, of oil fields, of entire swaths of land that ISIS once held, and which now – for which we are grateful – have largely been liberated. But after the military gains have been achieved, that doesn't mean the fight is over. It simply means that the fight is shifting into a new phase. And in order to achieve an enduring defeat of ISIS, we need to use – in addition to the military assets that have achieved so much – civilian tools to make these military gains durable and sustainable. So things like rule of law and building the capacity of governments, not just in the region, but also the countries that sent ISIS fighters into Syria and Iraq: enabling them, teaching them how to actually prosecute a terrorism-related case. And CVE is part of this as well. When FTFs return home, we need to stop them from recruiting and radicalizing others in their community. If they go to jail for a crime they've committed, that's an opportunity to deprogram or deradicalize them. There's also the “first, do no harm” principle. Even if that's not feasible in a particular case to deradicalize a particular inmate, let's look at ways we can prevent them and their ideas from contaminating their fellow inmates. So I think CVE nests into a larger civilian counterterrorism architecture that becomes increasingly important now that the fight against ISIS is moving into this new phase.

**BROWN:** What is that new phase?

**SALES:** The new phase, I think, is an all-of-government approach in which we will continue to apply military pressure where needed to ensure the enduring defeat on the battlefield, but also looking at ways to sustain those battlefield victories over the long haul through civilian tools like law enforcement, like financial designations, like CVE.

**BROWN:** Beyond the greater Levant, are there areas of the world where you're pursuing focused efforts at CVE as part of a preventative effort to prevent the spread of ISIS?

**SALES:** Well, essentially everywhere you see ISIS affiliates or ISIS-inspired violence, it's important for us to use the full suite of national tools there. Law enforcement will be appropriate in places like the Philippines. Military tools will be in important places like the Philippines, as we saw with the liberation of Mindanao in the past year. But CVE tools will be an important part of that conversation as well.

**BROWN:** Yeah. It's worth it. We have an interesting question about Iraq. The House NDAA passed last week sanctions on two Iraqi militias. One militia, of course, was As-Saib Ahl al-Haq, which won 114 seats in parliament earlier this month. Do you see this hindering U.S.-Iraqi CVE cooperation if it becomes law?

**SALES:** You know, that's such a fresh issue, involving pending legislation on which the administration may or may not have taken a position, that I'm going to punt on that one.

**BROWN:** OK. Fair enough. And we had another question about continuity and disagreement between the Obama administration's CVE policy and the Trump administration's CVE policy. How is what you're doing new and different, or how does it double down and deepen what had already begun under President Obama?

**SALES:** I think you see a lot of continuity between, not just the Trump administration and the Obama administration, but between the Trump administration and the Bush administration, on certain hard-power CT tools like military force, like drones. I think, when it comes to CVE in particular, it's a matter of emphasis. And at the risk of painting with too broad a brush here, I think one of the differences that we're seeing is prior CVE efforts often emphasize the development aspects of CVE. If you build a schoolhouse in a war-torn country, that creates educational opportunities, which creates better prospects for economic advancement, which means people will not be as easily seduced by radicalism. And so it's a counterterrorism program.

**BROWN:** Right.

**SALES:** Chain of causation is rather elaborate. Under the Trump administration, I think the focus is more on the ideology, the ideas. Let's work with partners to disprove and falsify the ideology that terrorists use to radicalize and recruit. It's more immediate. It's more direct. And I think that's one of the major differences that you're seeing now.

**BROWN:** There is an argument that some of our Western efforts to falsify claims made by various violent extremists rests on a rationalist fallacy and that the sort of context-free reasoning that we use based upon empirical analysis and facts doesn't work very well in some contexts. It certainly doesn't work very well in dissuading people who have already been

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radicalized from pursuing their agendas. Do you agree with that analysis? Or what other ways might we go about neutralizing problematic ideas which animate violent extremism?

**SALES:** Well, I think human beings are rational creatures. They're capable of giving reasons for their behavior, and they're capable of listening to reasons for why they shouldn't do what they're doing. Now, in order to fully develop that rational faculty such that people are receptive to arguments that would dissuade them from pursuing a path of violence, it's important that they cultivate the necessary critical-thinking skills. So you know, one of the things we're doing I mentioned a little bit in my remarks about our work with educational institutions and critical-thinking skills in particular. Let me elaborate on that a little bit. What we found is that students in, you know, middle school, high-school equivalents around the world, it's important for them to develop their ability to think critically through any sort of claim, but especially a claim made by a terrorist that, you know, you should leave your family, abandon your mother, go to Syria, strap on a vest and end your life. It doesn't sound like a particularly appealing course of action to me, to anybody in this room, to anybody watching on television. One of the ways that you can reinforce people's natural instinct is by equipping them with the critical-thinking skills so that they can spot logical fallacies, so they can spot leaps in logic, so they can spot, you know, other false flags. And that's one of the important things that we're doing in the educational context.

**BROWN:** Agree with you. Education is the only long-term – well, it's the best long-term strategy, and something that I think is woefully under-invested in right now. With that, we're actually running out of time. And I know you have to get to another appointment. Are there any final things that you'd like to say while you're here?

**SALES:** I'd just like to thank you again, Eric, for inviting me to be here. I'd like to thank the audience here in the room and on television for spending an hour with us. It's a measure of how important these issues are: confronting our terrorist adversaries and the ideas that animate them. And I'm grateful to everybody for their excellent questions.

**BROWN:** Thank you all for coming, and thank you, Ambassador Sales.

(APPLAUSE)