

Global Engagement Center: Background and Issues

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The State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) is tasked with countering foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation targeting the United States and U.S. interests. A number of recent [reports](#) have stated that the GEC has not been given access to authorized funds for FY2017, leading to speculation and concern in some quarters about its continued role and operations.

Counterterrorism Communications in the State Department

The [GEC](#) is the latest iteration of State Department efforts to coordinate interagency communications countering the messaging and influence of terrorist organizations and other groups and countries that threaten U.S. interests and security. Beginning in 2006, several "centers" have been established in the State Department to produce strategy for, direct, and coordinate counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) communications:

- The Counterterrorism Communication Center (CTCC) was established in the Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP) in summer 2006, coordinating interagency messaging and creating specific messaging for the Departments of State and Defense.
- The Global Strategic Engagement Center (GSEC) replaced the CTCC in 2008, conducting similar activities guided by the decisionmaking and planning of the National Security Council's (NSC's) Policy Coordination Committee (PCC) for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication.
- Established by executive order in 2011, the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communication (CSCC) replaced the GSEC in 2010, with dedicated funding, an interagency Steering Committee and operational Support Office, and a Coordinator leading the organization.

Establishing the GEC

In March 2016, President Barack Obama issued [Executive Order 13721](#), revoking the executive order that established the CSCC, and directing the Secretary of State to establish the GEC. Similar to the structure and purpose of the CSCC, the GEC was tasked with leading interagency efforts to carry out U.S.-government-sponsored counterterrorism communications to foreign publics, with a GEC Coordinator reporting to the Secretary through the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. The GEC was designed to lead a whole-of-government approach to countering terrorist messaging, violent extremism, and ideological support to terrorism; better integrating advanced technologies and analysis into U.S. government counterterrorism communications efforts; and leveraging private sector

and local foreign communicators, all aided by greater budgetary authority than had been afforded its predecessors. Executive Order 13721 directed executive branch agencies to provide the GEC with personnel, resources, and information to carry out its mission, and established an interagency Steering Committee, chaired by the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, to allow other agencies to provide strategic advice and ensure support for the GEC.

Expanding the GEC's Mandate

In December 2016, Congress enacted [Section 1287](#) of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 ([P.L. 114-328](#); FY2017 NDAA), which requires the Secretary of State essentially to reestablish the GEC with a purpose, structure, and authority that differ from those provided in Executive Order 13721. Whereas the original GEC had a specific purpose to focus on countering terrorist and extremist groups' influence, Section 1287 states that the GEC's purpose is to "counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts" that threaten U.S. national security interests as well as the national security interests of U.S. allied and partner countries. This language indicates a much broader purpose for the new GEC than the original one, possibly encompassing counterterrorism communications but also expanding the GEC's coverage to include countering certain foreign communications from any source. Section 1287 also provides the new GEC with specific hiring and grant-making authorities that were not included in Executive Order 13721. Under Section 1287, the GEC will be terminated in December 2024.

Increasing the GEC's Funding

Along with a significantly broadened mandate, the GEC stands to receive substantially increased funding under Section 1287, continuing an upward trend in recent years for funding of the GEC and the CSCC before it. GEC predecessors CTCC and GSEC were housed in State's Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP), and did not receive dedicated funding through legislation. For FY2015, the CSCC had a budget of approximately \$6 million in dedicated funding. Establishment of the GEC to replace the CSCC came with an expectation of an expanded role for the new GEC and a corresponding increase in funding. FY2016 GEC funding was approximately \$16 million, jumping to an [estimated](#) \$32 million by the end of FY2017. The State Department has requested to maintain GEC at the same funding level in FY2018. Section 1287 authorizes another increase in GEC funding, albeit through designating new transfer authority to the Secretary of Defense: pursuant to the provision, if the GEC receives less than \$80 million in direct funding in FY2017 or FY2018, the Secretary of Defense is authorized to transfer up to \$60 million to fund the GEC in each of those two fiscal years. GEC funding increases could be considerable, therefore, but such increases do not seem to be mandated per se by the authorization in Section 1287.

Current GEC Funding Issue

Recent news [articles](#) have reported that the State Department has not used all available funding for the GEC in FY2017, including a reported \$19.8 million in State Department accounts, and that the Secretary of State has not requested transfer of Defense Department funds authorized under Section 1287. Observers cited in these reports have questioned whether the GEC continues to have support of State Department leadership or can effectively carry out its mandate, and whether organizational inefficiency or shifts in U.S. policy are behind these funding decisions. Senators Rob Portman and Chris Murphy, sponsors of the GEC legislation in the FY2017 NDAA, among other Members of Congress, have [criticized](#) the GEC funding situation, stating that GEC capabilities and effectiveness are harmed by the continued lack of funding. State Department officials have [countered](#) that [reviews](#) of various organizations, activities, and policies within the department are ongoing, with the goal of ensuring that resources are being used effectively, and that the delays in utilization of GEC funding can be attributed to such review.