

An Interview with Maria Otero



As the senior State Department executive responsible for civilian security and human rights, what are the biggest challenges you face?

Otero: We face a variety of challenges. Some are external to the State Department, while some are internal. Before I describe some of these, though, let me put them in context. Essentially, part of Secretary Clinton's vision for 21st century statecraft consists of bringing together all of the bureaus in the State Department that in one way or another address the question of civilian security, or how we help governments and other elements of a democratic society strengthen institutions and legal frameworks that ultimately protect

citizens from a range of modern threats. This includes bureaus that address the hard security issues of counterterrorism and war crimes, to those that handle what are considered soft security issues: human rights, democracy, rule of law, and humanitarian assistance. If we look at the Department as a whole, there are five bureaus and three offices that in some way respond to civilian security. These eight bureaus and offices handle a total of about 4.5 billion dollars in resources, and manage hundreds of employees around the world.

So the vision that Secretary Clinton had for creating a balance between civilian security and military security and for designing a civilian response to situations of conflict is expansive. It therefore brought with it several challenges. One internal challenge is to ensure that all of these diverse bureaus and offices that have previously worked independently now see that what they're doing is part of the larger whole with a coherent purpose and a set of objectives that extend beyond their respective mandates. This means getting these bureaus to collaborate, to join forces and to proceed with a collective response to a situation or country, be it Burma, Syria, Kenya, or Honduras. This

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challenge is typical in any bureaucracy where bureaus or offices operate in a vertical rather than horizontal fashion.

Perhaps the biggest external challenge is to ensure that we communicate effectively with other U.S. government agencies to show them the advantages and benefits of coordinating and collaborating with the newly established “J family” of bureaus and offices. This challenge extends from one of the key directives of the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) which calls for a whole of government response to preventing and responding to crisis, conflict and instability. And then, of course, we face the challenge of how to most effectively draw on the varied toolkits available within our range of bureaus and offices to design and define the most robust policy response suited to each crisis situation we encounter. And when I say we, I mean the Bureaus of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) led by Assistant Secretary Frederick “Rick” Barton; Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) led by Assistant Secretary Michael Posner; International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) headed by Assistant Secretary William Brownfield; Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) led by Assistant Secretary Anne Richard; and Counterterrorism (CT) led by Coordinator Daniel Benjamin; as well as the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (TIP) headed by Ambassador Luis CdeBaca; the Office of Global Criminal Justice (GCJ) led by Ambassador-at-Large Stephen Rapp; and the Office of Global Youth Issues (GYI) headed by the Secretary’s Special Adviser for Global Youth Issues, Zeenat Rahman.

If we might parse some of those challenges a bit further, let’s talk first about the internal challenges within the State Department. You have within the “J family” five bureaus and

three offices each with a different lineage. Are there mechanisms in place for coordination and collaboration within the “J family?”

Otero: We have done a few things in that regard, because you are absolutely right, that is the first and most important challenge. Some of the things that I’ve put in place to increase coordination have been, from the very beginning, to develop a broader strategic mission statement with the assistant secretaries of the J bureaus so they can see what they are each doing as part of a larger whole. Second, I meet with my assistant secretaries once a week and give them an opportunity to talk about the things they are focusing on, but also give them the opportunity to interact with each other on various issues that emerge where they might not otherwise see connections immediately. Sometimes at these meetings we focus on a specific country or a given issue so we can discuss what each bureau is doing in those areas. A third element of this coordination takes place at the staff level. My staff regularly convenes all bureaus at various working levels to discuss and better understand how each element of the “J family” is playing out in a given country or crisis situation. For example, yesterday we held one such meeting on the transition in Afghanistan. I want all of the “J” bureaus to understand what the others are doing to ensure that they plan accordingly and eventually develop a more coherent policy. One other way in which we’re trying to improve bureau collaboration is by developing an inter-bureau detailee mechanism within the “J family,” enabling mid-level staff from each bureau or office to move to another bureau for six months. By fostering inter-bureau collaboration, we are strengthening our approaches and developing strong linkages that can only help enhance the “J family” performance on the ground.

Sounds like the Goldwater-Nichols inter-service requirement for the military.

Otero: That's right, and certainly the Department of Defense (DoD) has done some very interesting things in their efforts to change structure in support of improving process. This is what these bureaus and offices – collectively known as J – have been doing since J's formation earlier this year. Working closely with the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), we created a three-day course on "civilian security tradecraft" – the first of its kind for the Department. It was J bureaus and offices that provided content and case studies for the course, and J acted as convener and facilitator of the collaborative effort. Our "J family" team has done a terrific job, and FSI has commended us for it. The 3-day training was developed and conducted in mid-October this year. Many attendees came from the J bureaus and offices and most of them echoed the sentiments of one colleague who declared every member of a J bureau/office should take the course. The next step, of course, is to engage the regional bureaus and assist them in discovering the benefits of better understanding the work of their J colleagues. This effort of collaboration is not an end in itself; it is a means by which this family of diverse bureaus and offices can support the regional bureaus and the Department, broadly, more effectively, and hand-in-hand to achieve the Secretary's goals for U.S. foreign policy.

Do you have additional mechanisms in place to improve coordination between the "J family" bureaus and offices and the regional bureaus?

Otero: Yes. Perhaps the most obvious is that, as we increase our collaboration among the "J family" and with the regional bureaus, the regional bureaus see more clearly the benefits to them of working with us. In this way, a regional bureau

experiences the efficiencies resulting from well-sequenced and leveraged functions of the "J family" bureaus and offices. To use Syria as an example, J bureaus and offices have worked closely with the regional bureau and Syria desk. DRL (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor), CSO (Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations), and PRM (Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration), as well as the Office of War Crimes, now the Office of Global Criminal Justice (GCJ), have all brought their specialized expertise to bear in Syria. From humanitarian issues, to human rights and accountability efforts, to support for the opposition, "J family" bureaus and offices support the efforts of the regional bureaus at State. Our colleagues from the Near Eastern Affairs regional bureau recently praised the critically important work of the "J family" in Syria by saying our contribution makes it easier for them to do their work. Of course, this does not mean that everything is perfect, and that everybody always works together in a coordinated way. But that is why we now have a full range of bureaus and offices reporting to an Under Secretary who has the wherewithal to make sure she can help set everyone on the proper path when inter-bureau/office problems arise. I can also provide similar support and guidance as our bureaus and offices engage other agencies (such as USAID or DoD), international partners or foreign governments. The fact that we have these functional bureaus and offices working together strengthens our own voice and our overall effect.

Let's go back to one of the individual bureaus, in particular what used to be the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization; does the realignment of that office, now reporting to an Undersecretary—you—as opposed to directly to the Secretary, indicate a reevaluation within the State Department of the importance of reconstruction and stabilization?

Otero: The answer to that is yes, and the major difference is the greater emphasis on stabilization and preventing conflict rather than reconstruction. You will note that reconstruction is no longer in the bureau's name; it is the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO). The fact that the organization is now an independent bureau rather than an office is a statement of how central conflict prevention is to the Department. It demonstrates the Department's understanding that mitigating conflicts, addressing them before they hit us between the eyes, has become a core objective of the State Department. More and more we see countries affected by crises that span all sectors, as in Syria, and nothing could be more serious or difficult to deal with than that type of situation. Kenya, for example, recently experienced violent ethnic conflict following a disputed election. A possible role for the "J family" might be to engage in such a situation well in advance of the vote to help mitigate some of the potential and emerging conflict, using a range of local-level resources and tools. The "J family" provides the ground support that backs up the Chief of Mission and helps create a new way of doing what's needed. The new CSO bureau smartly identified a relatively small group of priority countries – Syria, Kenya, Burma and Honduras – in which to do this initially to establish its credibility, if you will, as a key resource for the regional bureaus. As a result, we're seeing CSO's re-conceptualization receive many positive receptions, including from Secretary Clinton, who has recognized its work publicly and ensured its importance.

There seems to have been a very substantial reevaluation of the value of what we five years ago called the civilian response capability; the civilian reserve corps has been abandoned, and the active and stand-by response corps seem to be refocused. What can you tell us about that?

Otero: The first thing I must refer to is resources. As you know, the resources made available for this bureau now are more limited than we would have liked; but that's just the reality of the world in which we're operating. The second thing is that in creating the bureau, we really had to evaluate everything that was being done to determine whether there was a more effective and cost efficient way to achieve it. The reduction in size of the Civilian Response Corps is not a decrease in the bureau's ability to do its work, but a redirection of resources to enable doing it in a more agile way. I think that is really the key issue. Because the question of civilian response is not only important but very central to what the State Department does, we took resources devoted to Washington activities and pushed them into the field.

But you believe you have within the "J family" of bureaus sufficient civilian resources to meet those needs?

Otero: Remember, some of the resources come from the "J family" of bureaus and offices but we can draw from other parts of the government as well. The more important reality is that even if you you had a civilian response capacity that could focus on many countries at once, you would still require a comprehensive and strategic approach. If you look right now how many countries have some kind of crisis or conflict in them, you're easily looking at 50 – 55 countries around the world. We certainly lack the resources to reach all of them. In truth, we would not want to spread our diplomatic resources so thinly. And so we have made decisions that, with the resources we do have in the "J family," we will ensure we are linked to and supporting some of the key priorities of the Department and the Administration.

One of the things that DoD does well is identify, articulate and disseminate the lessons learned through experience. Are there any formal procedures or plans in the State Department for identifying, articulating, disseminating, and institutionalizing the lessons its people have learned from the diplomatic element of national power over the last ten years that would be equivalent to the Chairman Martin Dempsey's Decade of War project?

Otero: Knowledge management, lessons learned, is a most crucial component of the “J family” collaboration on civilian security. Formalizing and institutionalizing this is a process that has begun and is under consideration. We will put in place a mechanism to achieve this. It will necessitate a Department-wide knowledge management effort to accomplish what you’re suggesting. The new CSO bureau documents and shares input and lessons from work being done throughout the Department on conflict and this work is already sharpening the way we engage, for example through interagency exercises that help test our capacities.

Wouldn't there be some value to creating such a learning and dissemination capacity within the “J family” of bureaus all dedicated to civilian security?

Otero: Yes indeed, that’s in the works but that’s all I’m going to tell you. You’re hitting on something we believe is very important and we are developing something that will help us achieve this. We have taken the important steps of consolidating these bureaus, of facilitating their ability to collaborate and we are developing a new way of interacting among them that is not fully mature, but it’s quite advanced. In Syria, we have really collaborated very well; learning

from past experience, for example, we’ve worked well with USAID. The ability to capture these lessons, to understand how things happened, to understand whether we have the right mechanisms in place to succeed in the future and to share it among “J family” bureaus and offices and the Department, that piece is part of the process which we’re trying to create.

In this process, are you trying to develop skill sets that are appropriate for preventing and responding to conflict, as opposed to the more traditional State Department skills sets like observing, reporting, negotiating?

Otero: Absolutely, and the toolkit available for conflict prevention is fairly large and well developed. We do, of course, expect to develop additional skills and tools, especially given the new technologies available to us now. For the most part, though, if we decide to address a given crisis situation, we already have an array of methodologies we can choose from to carry out our work. These include engaging religious actors to encourage them to be proactive in preventing conflict, working with local organizations to strengthen community relationships, and many others. For example, we’re working to expand government capacity in Honduras, where investigation of crimes, identification of suspects, and carrying through with prosecutions are weak, resulting in a big gap in civilian security. To help close this gap, J bureaus and offices are drawing on the skills of experienced law enforcement officials from places like Philadelphia and Houston to mentor local Honduran police. We are tapping into the expertise of local-level, Spanish-speaking officials to provide the kind of agile response I mentioned earlier. Burma is another interesting case. In Burma, the “J family” of bureaus and offices is collaborating with our regional bureau to implement de-mining

programs as a basis for encouraging local efforts at reconciliation and advancing peace.

Turning back to Syria, does the United States have a responsibility to protect civilians in Syria from the brutality of the regime and the conflict that's going on, and if you believe we do have a responsibility to protect, how do we exercise that responsibility?

Otero: Syria poses a very challenging situation because it's hard to get resources into the country. One thing is clear, however – we have made a concrete commitment to support Syrians' aspirations for a free and democratic Syria that protects the rights, the dignity, and the aspirations of all Syrians and all communities. One way the "J family" contributes to that is by providing non-lethal aid to the opposition and training them to use it through a variety of means. We've found that communication technologies are extremely helpful, especially as the opposition is working to create a protective environment. Along with our humanitarian assistance to those affected by the crisis provided through PRM – which reached 72 million dollars over the past 15 months – we are also providing medical assistance to those in need and are working to get that into areas that are under the control of the opposition. In total, PRM and USAID, working together, have put almost 210 million dollars towards humanitarian assistance for Syrian refugees. This is an excellent example of two U.S. government organizations working together in a crisis situation. In addition, we are providing robust support to the opposition's efforts to document and investigate atrocities so that, in the future, they can make sound decisions concerning accountability and reconciliation. We are also conducting "Planning and Civil Administration Training" with local civilian leaders from inside Syria so that they can

better provide local government, particularly in areas where the Assad regime now has only limited influence. We will continue to carry out this kind of work, but our limited access to the country constrains our ability to expand the scope of our efforts.

How does the State Department plan with other agencies to prevent conflict? I'm always troubled by the "proving a negative" paradox.

Otero: You're right, it often seems that no one recognizes when a conflict has been prevented. I like to use the example of elections. The only time you hear about elections is when people have been killed, when riots and fires break out, when things are an absolute mess. Few, on the other hand, hear about elections when they go well. Take the last elections in Nigeria, for example. Not much has been said about them because they were credible, transparent, and recognized as being far better than previous elections. It took an enormous amount of work for all involved to achieve that, though, and it took conflict prevention work. It's been very difficult to claim the recognition of that success, however, and to acknowledge it publicly. As for us, the "J family" – especially CSO – works on conflict prevention directly with the regional bureaus helping to identify potential indicators of conflict and deciding which crisis situations we should address and what responses are most appropriate.

In your opinion, is interagency planning for conflict stabilization and prevention, sufficient or do we need to improve interagency planning and if so, how?

Otero: Part of the QDDR vision involves a strong focus on whole-of-government responses to challenges around the world and so this concept

of interagency collaboration is a very important one. Clearly, we have the interagency mechanisms in place to assess difficult situations and to address them together. In some cases, though, we may need additional mechanisms to be able to provide the quality of coordination required. In these cases, a lot of different government agencies may be involved. We tend to coordinate most often with USAID, Defense, and Justice. I think we've come a long way towards enhancing our coordination. For example, I just came back from visiting two Combatant Commands. I have met with almost all of the Combatant Commands in order to help them understand what we're doing in the "J family," and to understand where there are potential synergies so that we can develop a robust relationship. In addition, I have a Colonel on my staff who maintains and enhances those connections. With USAID, I hold a monthly meeting with Deputy Administrator Donald Steinberg to review the areas in which we're collaborating, where we're working together well, and where we are not working together as well. This allows us to intentionally strengthen or shift our emphasis.

A lot of the world's contemporary conflict is spurred by actions of transnational illicit organizations and networks. Some people talk about the convergence of transnational organized crime, terrorism, insurgencies, etc. How can the diplomatic element of U.S. national power best be deployed against that particular national security threat?

Otero: That's a tough one, especially when you start combining transnational criminal organizations with terrorism. We need to recognize the enormous importance of being able to apply resources to address this challenge. When it comes to countering narco-trafficking, we have a strong record and we've already achieved some success

in Colombia, for example. We are also addressing these issues in Central America and Mexico, where we still need to do a lot more. A major part of our effort is enhancing the capacity of governments and civil society in these countries to address these issues themselves. We do this by providing resources and training. This is essential.

One other piece that is essential – and this comes in to play more with trafficking in persons, for example – is to demand from countries a more affirmative and resolved response. We do that through our annual trafficking in persons report, our ranking of countries in tiers, and by providing assistance in developing national plans of action to address trafficking. We've made quite a bit a progress on that front. In fact, you hear about the issue a lot more than you did two years ago. Part of this is due to the enormous effort Secretary Clinton has personally made to highlight the issue, including raising awareness through the participation of high-profile figures and celebrities. You know that when you run into someone like Will Smith at an event on foreign affairs and trafficking that the Secretary's efforts are having an effect. That said, we still have a great deal of work to do on combating this scourge.

The Secretary created the new Bureau of Counterterrorism (CT) recognizing that fighting terrorism, especially in some parts of the world, is a primary objective of the U.S. government. CT is also part of the "J family." A lot of our work on counterterrorism involves helping countries develop their own capacity to combat terrorism, allocate their own resources toward it and collaborate with each other more effectively. We have created the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), which brings more than 30 countries together, precisely to do this. And we've created, or are in the process of creating, several other robust institutions to help certain countries fight terrorism on their soil.

One of the regions of the world most troubled by the challenges you just described is Latin America. In January the President released, “Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership; Priorities for 21st Century Defense,” which describes a pivot, a geographical pivot towards Asia, and the Far East. Do you detect anything similar taking place within the State Department?

Otero: Absolutely. Secretary Clinton gave a major speech late last fall – “America’s Pacific Century” speech—on the importance of our presence and interaction with the countries of the Pacific, published an article in *Foreign Policy* and subsequently discussed it with key interlocutors in many countries she visited thereafter. I specify the Pacific because it’s not just Asia. You have many countries that border the Pacific as does the U.S. So it includes Peru, Chile, and other countries that make it a broader effort. Clearly, these countries are of enormous importance in the work that we’re doing and harnessing the growth and dynamism in the Asia-Pacific region stands central to U.S. economic and strategic interests. Indeed, our strategic “rebalance” reflects a desire to strengthen long-standing security, economic, and people-to-people ties. That said, the pivot to Asia will not come at the expense of U.S. national security interests in other regions. Other regions remain vitally important, and we will continue to coordinate closely with like-minded countries and institutions from all regions to welcome an Asia capable of upholding a rules-based international order and helping to solve global challenges that impact U.S. national interests.

You’ve mentioned “whole-of-government approaches” several times. Others refer to this as the comprehensive approach and the Secretary called it the 3D approach (Diplomacy, Defense, Development). Is there any prospect for a

QDDDR (Quadrennial Diplomacy, Defense, and Development Review) in the future?

Otero: It’s conceivable that such collaboration might be possible, but it would have to stem from the QDR and QDDDR. It is imperative to be able to ensure collaboration across the government with a larger number of agencies/departments, and that is clearly the objective of the National Security Council. These components of government, though, are complex and any effort to bring them closer together would be challenging. For its part, the QDDDR provides a vision of the U.S. government, with its many agencies, operating as a unit around the world. The presence of our government in other countries is concentrated in our embassies, which function under the President’s representatives – i.e., the Chiefs of Mission, our Ambassadors. Our Ambassadors are responsible for carrying out all of our combined initiatives in countries around the world, and are the sole representative of the President in a given country. It is the Ambassador’s responsibility to ensure that all the pieces of the U.S. government operating in a given country are collaborating and coordinating under her oversight. This is something that Secretary Clinton has made very clear, something that the President also has made very clear. But it increasingly is an enormous task. In big embassies, there are sometimes 30 different agencies in a country that are all reporting to the Ambassador. Therefore, the effort you’re suggesting, of whole-of-government, is something that has to happen at the embassy level first and foremost. **PRISM**