PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Contact:
Danielle Hawkins
START
301.405.6600
dhawkins@start.umd.edu

START Featured in DHS Hill Briefing

College Park, MD, December 4, 2007 – Dr. Tiffany Lightbourn, Program Manager at the Office of University Programs of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), testified before Congress for the November 6th hearing, “Combating Hate Crimes and Discrimination in the Organization for Security and Cooperation of Europe (OSCE).” Her testimony featured work done by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), a DHS Center of Excellence.

Lightbourn briefed the United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission) on the global problem of xenophobia, the current research on radicalization, and what governments can do to prevent and prepare for threats to national security due to these societal ills.

According to Lightbourn, September 11th signaled the need to better understand the process of radicalization at the university and group level. It was out of this need that START was founded. START’s research in this area has focused on the premise that two factors facilitate radicalization: individual characteristics and characteristics of the society in which the individual lives. One START project by Dr. Clark McCauley and DHS post-doc Sophia Moskalenko has identified factors that can act as catalysts for individuals, groups, and societies to resort to radicalization. Another, by Jon Wilkenfeld and Victor Asal, is investigating the probability of ethnic organizations turning to violence and terror to express their perceived political and social grievances.

Lightbourn highlighted a major finding from these projects; “Important to note in these early studies is that religiosity and religious identity are not what lead people to become radicalized. Rather, the political grievances people feel from living in country contexts in which religious discrimination is tolerated or commonplace, leads them to seek similar
others and form social networks and/or organizations, which can then become conduits for radicalization.”

In addition to START’s research projects, Lightbourn also mentioned a START educational program, Campus Dialogues, that is working to prevent conflict and discrimination among religious groups. Across five campuses, students from the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish faith traditions come together for this purpose. “The idea here is that building the social relationships between faith traditions can help mitigate potential conflicts when more serious differences arise.”

Lightbourn credits START and its projects with providing “fundamental knowledge discovery” in pursuit of the DHS S&T Human Factors Division mission “to apply the social and behavioral sciences to improve detection, analysis, and understanding of the threats posed by individuals, groups, and radical movements.”

START, supported by the DHS Science & Technology (S&T) Directorate, has over 30 active research projects on the social and behavioral aspects of terrorism. One of five DHS Centers of Excellence (COE) formed under the Science & Technology Directorate, START uses state-of-the-art theories, methods, and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics, and social and psychological impacts of terrorism.