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Opening Statement of the Honorable **Ed Royce (R-CA), Chairman**
House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing:
“Countering the Virtual Caliphate”
June 23, 2016

(As prepared for delivery)

This hearing will come to order. An unfortunate irony in the effort to combat ISIS recruitment online is that the United States – the world’s leader in technological innovation – *is hardly in the game*. To protect Americans at home and abroad, this must change.

So great has been the explosion of slick and professional ISIS videos online that some refer to it as a “virtual caliphate.” Within seconds, ISIS can reach a global audience using popular social media sites - disseminating hateful propaganda to recruit new fighters and promote its extreme ideology.

And more and more, the virtual caliphate is calling on its followers not to go to Syria, Iraq or Libya and take up arms – *but to attack where they are at home*. “The smallest action you do in their heartland is better and more enduring to us than what you would if you were with us,” is the message being pounded into would-be jihadists – including many Americans. While the investigation of the horrific attack in Orlando continues, we know that this terrorist consumed Islamist propaganda over the internet. The attacks in Brussels, San Bernardino and Paris were also tied to ISIS’ online efforts.

Indeed, ISIS’ online dominance is just as critical to the organization as the large amounts of territory it controls in Iraq and Syria. Unfortunately, the pace of the ‘cyber bombs’ we are dropping on ISIS’ virtual sanctuary to take out these websites is like our campaign on its physical territory – slow and inadequate.

And the State Department’s efforts to respond to extremist content online are woefully inadequate. It’s Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications was designed to identify and respond to extremist content online. Yet because its communications were “branded” with the official State Department seal, they fell on death ears.

In March, the President issued an Executive Order to revamp this effort, renaming it the Global Engagement Center and giving it the mission to lead the government-wide effort to “diminish the influence of international terrorist organizations.” The Committee will soon hear from the Administration how this effort differs from past failures.

At a basic level, key questions remain, including the type of message that would be most effective in the face of this virulent ideology. Some suggest that the voices of disaffected former jihadists

are particularly potent in deterring future jihadists. These are individuals who quickly discovered that life under ISIS is *not* the utopia they were promised.

But if this is the message, how should it be delivered? Should the federal government produce and disseminate content? Is the federal bureaucracy equipped for such a fast moving fight? Does any association with the State Department mean this message is dead on arrival?

A more effective approach could have the U.S. government issuing grants to outside groups to carry out this mission. This would have the advantage of allowing the U.S. government set the policy, but put those with the technical expertise and credible voice in the driver's seat. After all, such separation and distance from the U.S. government has helped our democracy promotion programs through the National Endowment for Democracy work in areas of the globe where official U.S. support just isn't feasible.

Admittedly, this isn't easy. If it was, we'd be much better positioned going forward. But if we don't come to grips with the virtual caliphate now, this long struggle against Islamist terrorism will extend even longer, with great loss of life.

I now turn to the Ranking Member for any opening comments he may have.