

# Program on Extremism

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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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## **Countering the Virtual Caliphate**

Written testimony of:

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Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel and distinguished Members of the Committee, it is a privilege to be invited to speak on countering ISIS' use of the online environment.

## **Overview of Threat in U.S.**

FBI Director Comey stated that there are at least 900 active investigations into homegrown violent extremism across all 50 states.<sup>1</sup> Intelligence officials have also estimated that upwards of 250 Americans have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria and Iraq to join groups like ISIS.<sup>2</sup> The Program on Extremism at the George Washington University has identified 90 people who have been charged with ISIS-related offenses in the United States.<sup>3</sup> "Homegrown terrorism" is an apt description, as the overwhelming majority of these individuals are U.S. citizens born and raised in the homeland. That being said, there is no typical profile of an ISIS recruit. While, among those charged, the average age of an American recruit is 26, one was as young as 15 and another was as old as 47. The majority are male, but 11 women have been charged with ISIS-related offenses.

The United States, for a variety of reasons and with some notable exceptions, does not have extremist organizations providing in-person ideological and logistical support to individuals drawn to the jihadi narrative. This is in contrast to some European countries where Salafi-jihadi groups can provide ideological underpinnings and, in some select cases, help facilitate travel to Syria and Iraq. As a result, many American ISIS sympathizers are forced to find like-minded communities online. U.S. authorities estimate that several thousand Americans consume ISIS propaganda online creating what has been described as a "radicalization echo chamber."<sup>4</sup> American ISIS sympathizers are active on a variety of platforms, from open forums like Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and Tumblr, to more discrete messaging applications such as Kik, Telegram, and surespot.

American ISIS sympathizers can ask questions about travel, religion, and current events. American ISIS supporters online broadly divide into two sets: those who locate themselves in Syria and Iraq and those still in America but aspiring to assist ISIS in a number of ways. Those in the former group often maintain their network of friends in the U.S. after arriving in ISIS territory. They post near real-time updates of ISIS-led attacks and life in the Caliphate, encouraging their fellow Americans to make the trek and, at times, scolding their offline and online friends for their lack of commitment to the cause.

ISIS sympathizers use the online environment in a variety of ways. First, of course they use the internet to spread their propaganda. Second, in some cases, ISIS recruiters act as spotters to identify and groom impressable, and often young, men and women into supporting the group. Numerous media reports such as the *New York Times* story of 'Alex' have explained this

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Johnson, "Comey: Feds have Roughly 900 Domestic Probes About Islamic State Operatives, Other Extremists," *USA Today*, October 3, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Testimony of James B. Comey, Director of Federal Bureau of Investigation, Statement Before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. October 8, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Program on Extremism, "May Update," June 2, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Thomas, Mike Levine, Jack Date, and Jack Cloherty, "ISIS: Potentially 'Thousands' of Online Followers Inside US Homeland, FBI Chief Warns," *ABC News*, May 7, 2015.

approach. The young woman from Washington State was, over the course of months, slowly groomed into supporting ISIS.

Third, they provide logistical support for would-be recruits. In the case of Illinois-based Mohammad Khan and his two siblings, ISIS supporters they met online offered guidance on what to pack for their journey to the so-called Caliphate and provided phone numbers belonging to local facilitators who could assist them in crossing the border from Turkey to Syria.

Fourth, ISIS recruiters act as what the FBI Director has termed the “devil on the shoulder,” encouraging American ISIS supporters to commit attacks in the homeland. Perhaps the starkest example of this dynamic is the online encouragement provided to Americans Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi prior to their attempted attack on the “Muhammad Art Exhibit and Cartoon Contest” in Garland, Texas.

While social media allows ISIS to push its message to a larger audience, the use of these platforms alone does not fully explain the group’s powerful draw. Another component driving the unprecedented number of U.S.-persons charged with terrorism-related offenses in the last two years is ISIS’ narrative. The group’s message of territorial control and the declaration of the so-called Caliphate, among other reasons, has clearly resonated with individuals within our borders.

## **Resiliency**

ISIS supporters are very active and persistent online. Despite repeated removal from social media sites for violating terms of service, sympathizers routinely return to these platforms with new accounts, much like Yassin. A prime example of this is Safya Yassin, a 38-year-old from Missouri who, until her recent arrest, was allegedly a key player among English-language ISIS supporters online. She allegedly operated as many as 97 Twitter accounts.<sup>5</sup>

There is a well-used but decentralized system that provides a level of resiliency to these online social networks. Using Twitter as an example, ISIS “shoutout” accounts announce the newly created accounts of previously suspended users, to a degree allowing returning users to reconnect with their social networks. Another example of this dynamic is illustrated by the case of Terrence McNeil, a young man from Ohio who was charged with solicitation to commit a crime of violence.<sup>6</sup> When the Program on Extremism began passively monitoring his account, his Twitter handle was ‘Lone14Wolfe.’ Each time he was suspended from Twitter for violating the terms of service, he would return as Lonewolf15, 16, 17, and so on. When he came back online, ISIS shoutout accounts announced his new account which provided two primary benefits: (1) verification from accounts of trusted ISIS sympathizers; and (2) the ability to regain some of his previous followers. By the time he was arrested, Mr. McNeil was ‘lonewolf\_21.’ We have seen this dynamic play out time and time again.

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<sup>5</sup> *United States of America vs. Safya Roe Yassin*, Affidavit (February 17, 2016), 9.

<sup>6</sup> *United States of America vs. Terrence Joseph McNeil*, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit (February 24, 2015).

However, it is important to note that the ISIS Twitter network has declined substantially since 2014 as a result of sustained suspensions.<sup>7</sup> An overt English-language ISIS support network is nearly gone from Facebook, but they occasionally mount campaigns and use it for person-to-person communication.

At the same time, we have observed ISIS supporters spreading to other more permissive online environments while continuing to use mainstream sites with a larger audience that more forcefully enforce terms of service violations. The English-language ISIS echo chamber is now mostly concentrated to Telegram, where ISIS supporters can more easily congregate.

### **Accelerant, Not Necessarily the Starter**

ISIS-related radicalization is by no means limited to social media. While instances of purely web-driven, individual radicalization are numerous, in several cases U.S.-based individuals initially cultivated, and later strengthened, their interest in ISIS' narrative through face-to-face relationships. It is an over-simplification to say that "internet radicalization" is the main factor among American ISIS supporters. Of course, the online environment allows for greater interactivity between would-be recruits, but in many ways the online personas ISIS supporters assume is simply a reflection of their offline beliefs. Rather, in most cases online and offline dynamics complement one another. In 1998, Osama Bin Laden faxed his declaration of war on the West. It would rightly be seen as naïve to contend that fax machine radicalization was a key driver of al-Qaeda's early recruitment. A similar dynamic continues to play out 18 years later. In-person relationships still matter a great deal. A review of the 90 legal cases in the U.S. shows that, with some exceptions, friends, families, and even romantic partners played a role in the radicalization process.

Individuals do not radicalize in a vacuum. The online environment can help solidify their beliefs and provide support that was unimaginable just a few years ago, but it is not the single cause of, nor the single solution to, terrorist recruitment.

### **Policy Recommendations**

The U.S. State Department and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have taken an important step with the release of a first-of-its-kind countering violent extremism (CVE) strategy.<sup>8</sup> The strategy outlines five objectives: expanding international partnerships, encouraging partner governments to adopt CVE policies, employing foreign assistance tools, empowering and amplifying local credible voices, and strengthening the capabilities of government and non-government actors to rehabilitate and reintegrate radicalized individuals. The State Department has also expanded the mission of its Bureau on

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<sup>7</sup> J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter," *The Brookings Institution Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, March 2015; J.M. Berger and Heather Perez, "The Islamic State's Diminishing Returns on Twitter: How Suspensions are Limiting the Social Networks of English-Speaking ISIS Supporters," *Program on Extremism*, February 2016.

<sup>8</sup> United States Department of State and United States Agency for International Development, "Department of State and USAID Joint Statement on Countering Violent Extremism," May 2016.

Counterterrorism to now include proactive CVE efforts.<sup>9</sup> While a step in the right direction, time will tell whether this new focus on preventive programming will result in a tangible shift in resources and personnel.

Recently, the State Department has also reorganized to address the changing nature of ISIS' use of the Internet. The newly formed the Global Engagement Center (GEC) represents a recognition that previous efforts needed to be adjusted. However, the bureaucratic and structural issues that hampered the GEC's predecessor are, to a very real extent, still present. The Committee should consider a number of policy and legislative options to assist the U.S. Government in focusing its efforts.

The Committee should encourage the Administration to take a more targeted and interactive approach to counter- and alternative-messaging. It is difficult to measure the effectiveness of broad-based messaging. Further, the small number of users attracted to jihadi ideology relative to the total number of Internet users suggests that a broad-based approach may not reach its intended audience. Greater interaction between State Department employees and ISIS supporters would likely yield better results. This is not to say that a State Department tweet will dissuade a hardened supporter, but the goal of online engagement should be to introduce seeds of doubt so that in-person interventions can be more successful. Additionally, there are some operational benefits to the State Department muddling the online efforts of ISIS supporters via counter-messaging.

There are many barriers to this approach. As demonstrated in reactions to the State Department's "Think Again Turn Away" campaign, there is little appetite for the trial and error necessary for effective counter-messaging. Successful counter-messaging campaigns need the political capital to operate with flexibility. Messengers can and should adjust based on feedback, but they need to be given the latitude to make mistakes and to learn from said mistakes without fear of professional reprisal.

In order to perform targeted messaging, the GEC may be limited in its online engagement by legal restrictions on collecting personal information. Working with civil rights and civil liberties groups, this Committee should consider legislative fixes that allow the GEC some limited exemptions from Privacy Act requirements.

There has been a noticeable push to empower local partners to provide counter- and alternative-messaging. In conversations with civil society partners, many have expressed concern that engaging with known or suspected terrorists online may unduly place them under law enforcement suspicion. The Administration should consider providing legal guidance on the material support statute and recommend best practices so potential counter-messengers can make informed decisions on whether and how to engage.

ISIS supporters are true believers who see it as their mission to amplify the group's narrative. Any attempt to "counter the virtual caliphate" will have to accept that the opposing side has a passion to push out their message. Encouraging that level of fervor in anti-ISIS messaging will

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<sup>9</sup> Justin Siberell, Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism, United States Department of State, Remarks at the Program on Extremism at George Washington University, May 25, 2016.

require collaboration between actors from government, civil society, and technology companies as well as increased resources (whether from the government or private entities).

Technology companies have in the past been pushed by Congress and the public to expand and enforce their terms of service. But technology companies are much more comfortable with providing training and expertise on how to use their platforms for counter- and alternative-messaging and much less comfortable when it comes to removal of content. The U.S. government should seize this window of opportunity. It should use its convening authority to bring together civil society partners who want to perform counter-messaging but do not understand the technology, and social media companies that know their platforms but do not understand the nuances of counter-messaging.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you. I welcome your questions.