

TESTIMONY BY DR. PETER NEUMANN BEFORE THE FOREIGN RELATIONS
COMMITTEE, U.S: HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Chairman, Ranking Member, Members of the Committee,

My name is Peter Neumann, I am a Professor of Security Studies at King's College London, and also serve as Director of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR).

I appreciate the opportunity to talk about countering the propaganda of groups like ISIL on the internet.

My team and I have dedicated the past four years to understanding why young Muslims from Western countries are fighting for jihadist groups in Syria, as well as why some of them are staying home, become inspired by jihadist propaganda and end up attacking their own countries.

Based on this research, and based on our accumulated knowledge about these people, let me use this opportunity to make two quick points each on:

- (1) The way that ISIL is using the internet;
- (2) How to counter their narrative;
- (3) What government needs to do to be more effective in this space.

How ISIL is using the internet

Let me start by addressing how ISIL is using the internet:

- 1) ISIL has been more successful and effective in exploiting the internet than any group I have seen in 17 years of researching terrorism. The sophistication of some its media products, the range of platforms it uses, the way it segments according to audiences, and how it has succeeded – at times – in dominating the conversation, all this is unprecedented.

But, and that's my second point:

- 2) The online ecosystem of ISIL goes beyond the group itself, and it includes more than just the videos that everyone is always talking about. What gives ISIL so much punch online is also for example individual fighters, who facilitate one on one conversations. It's also what we call the cheerleaders and fanboys and wannabes – people who aren't actually members of ISIL, who aren't actually in Syria, but are, essentially, freelance supporters, often based in the West. They are the ones who are giving the group its online oomph. As far as online is concerned it's not just a group, it's what one of my colleagues, Dr Nico Prucha, described as a swarm.

How to counter the narrative

So how do we counter this swarm?

- 1) There isn't one counter-narrative, and there isn't one counter-narrator. Just like ISIL is segmenting its message according to audiences, we need to recognize that people are becoming attracted to ISIL for different reasons, have different interests, and are at different points along the path of radicalization. Some will listen to a Salafi sheikh, others are more receptive to a movie star. Credibility, though, ultimately comes from authenticity. And that's why the most credible messengers, in my view, are young people who are just like the ones whom ISIL is trying to recruit.

We need more of them online and to engage in this battle, and that brings me to my next point:

- 2) What's needed is scale. Scale, in my view, is more important than message. Even if we found the perfect message, the perfect messenger, and even if we managed to produce the perfect video, it would still be a drop in the ocean. There still wouldn't be oomph. This is the internet. People are exposed to thousands of things every day. To get your message through, you need to be loud, you need volume, and you can't be on your own.

What government can do

I want to close with two quick observations on how government can be more effective in this space.

- 1) Government alone will never be able to create the volume that's needed; it's not a credible messenger in this space; and worst of all Government is by definition risk averse, which is the opposite of what you have to be online. For that reason, I wholeheartedly support the change of approach that's happened last year. Away from government centered messaging towards empowering and working with partners: industry, NGOs, media companies, grassroots organization, maybe even philanthropists. To sponsor hackathons, competitions, and campaigns. Facebook recently set up an organization in Germany called OCCI – the Online Civil Courage Initiative. We need more of that, and whatever government can do not to run them but to help bring them about, it should do.

My final point:

- 2) We need more data. It's almost an embarrassment. It's an embarrassment for everyone who works and is interested in this area. But we really don't know what works. The initiatives that have happened have been so small scale and few in number, they haven't generated enough data to make meaningful assertions. This must be a priority for industry, for government, and for NGOs running programs. And for all of them together.

Many thanks.