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Opening Statement of the Honorable **Ed Royce (R-CA)**, Chairman  
House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing:  
“Countering the Virtual Caliphate: The State Department’s  
Performance”  
July 13, 2016

(As prepared for delivery)

Today we continue our oversight of the Administration’s response to ISIS and Islamist extremism. Specifically, we’ll be looking at the State Department’s efforts to counter ISIS’ message online.

As the Committee heard last month, the internet is awash with terrorist propaganda. This includes horrific videos of beheadings, firing squads, and the torture of innocent men, women and children. ISIS operates a vast network of online recruiters and messengers whose mission is to expand their ranks across multiple continents, including ours.

This is their “virtual caliphate.” Using popular social media sites, ISIS can reach a global audience within seconds. Once lured-in, they communicate privately on platforms with sophisticated encryption, encouraging thousands – including many from western countries – to travel to Syria and Iraq and join the fight. But 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. Orlando is a grim example of that.

As we will hear today, ISIS’ online presence is just as critical to the organization as the large amounts of territory it controls in Iraq and Syria. Defeating ISIS on both the physical and virtual battlefields requires strong and decisive action.

Unfortunately, the State Department efforts to respond to extremist content online have struggled. Its 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, nobody listened.

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.” We look forward to hearing from the Department today how the Global Engagement Center is taking on this fight.

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? I suspect not.

Does any association with the State Department mean this message is dead on arrival? As one witness told the Committee last month: “worst of all Government is by definition risk adverse, which is the opposite of what you have to be online.”

Previous witnesses suggested that 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 to 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.

And what role should technology companies play? In recent weeks, some have announced promising new technologies to automatically remove extreme content. We need everyone acting in sync, including the tech sector, entertainment industry, and government.

Time is of the essence. If we don’t come to grips with the virtual caliphate now, this struggle against Islamist terrorism will become more challenging by the day.