

STATEMENT

OF

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“THE INTERNET: A PORTAL TO VIOLENT ISLAMIST EXTREMISM”

BEFORE

THE U.S. SENATE

COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

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Chairman Lieberman, Senator Collins, and distinguished members of the Committee, your continued examination of the issues involved in extremist radicalization is central to understanding our adversaries. Thank you for your leadership in pushing these critical homeland security issues to the fore – proactive consideration of these challenges and carefully calibrated responses using all instruments of statecraft is crucial to bolstering our national security.


I am pleased to be here today to share the findings and recommendations of our report, “NETworked Radicalization: A Counter-Strategy.” This report was developed by the Task Force on Internet-Facilitated Radicalization, which was convened under the leadership of The George Washington University’s Homeland Security Policy

Institute (HSPI) and The University of Virginia’s Critical Incident Analysis Group (CIAG). I am pleased to recognize my co-chair, Dr. Gregory Saathoff, and would like to thank the members of the task force, a group of well-regarded subject matter experts from a broad spectrum of disciplines. A copy of the report is attached for submission to the record.

Savvy use of the Internet has empowered terror networks to expand their reach beyond national borders by enabling wide distribution of a compelling message and social connectivity with new audiences. Cyberspace is now the battlefield and the “war” is one of ideas. Our adversaries currently have firm possession of the battlefield because they understand this shift and have crafted and disseminated a narrative that resonates and has served both to energize and expand their ranks. Internet chat rooms are now supplementing and replacing mosques, community centers and coffee shops as venues for recruitment and radicalization by terrorist groups like al Qaeda. The real time, two-way dialogue of chat rooms has taken the fight global, enabling extremist ideas to be shared, take root, be reaffirmed and spread exponentially.

Use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has made a range of terrorist operational activities cheaper, faster, and more secure. Communications. Fundraising. Planning and coordination. Training. Information gathering and data mining. Propaganda and spreading misinformation. Radicalization and recruitment. The list is long, and not even complete.

Use of the Internet by terrorists groups has evolved over time. Terrorists once used the Internet primarily to support operations. Increasingly, however, the World Wide Web is also used for another purpose: to spread radical ideologies faster, wider, and




more effectively than ever before possible. Radicalization, whether facilitated by CMC, face-to-face interaction, or other means, can create pools of like-minded believers who may go on to enlist into terrorist movements and plan and commit acts of violence. Radicalization is the lifeblood of the global extremist “jihadi” Salafist movement, generating new recruits for existing groups or creating environments in which new groups arise.

Planning and preparations for the 9/11 attacks were facilitated by the Internet. Operatives engaged in the attack used it to communicate. Flight schools were researched through it, as were targets. Its uses have evolved over time and to increasingly gruesome creative effect – witness the videotaped beheadings of Nicholas Berg and Daniel Pearl circulated online to the four corners of the earth. These uses of the Internet, horrific as they may be, are fundamentally static – one-way communication directed at a global audience. Terrorists, however, now make effective use of the many varieties of interactive communication made possible by the Internet. By its very nature, the Internet “enables groups and relationships to form that otherwise would not be able to, thereby increasing and enhancing social connectivity.” As a new means of social interaction, it brings together people – friends, family members, or complete strangers – with similar interests and values, fostering a sense of affiliation and identity. The “killer application” of the Internet is not so much its use as a broadcast tool, but its function as a communications channel that links people in cyberspace, who then meet and can take action in the physical world. While no one-size-fits-all model can indicate which individuals will be receptive – or vulnerable – to an extremist message and “call to action” at the nexus of the physical and the cyber realms, the world has, unfortunately, witnessed a growing number of instances demonstrating the global reach of the terrorist narrative.

From Toronto to London, from Madrid to Morocco, and in Holland, America and beyond, people have faced the impact of radicalization. Some view these instances as examples of “homegrown” terrorism, but the label is something of a misnomer. The Internet has created a largely borderless world; participants in terrorism are therefore perhaps best understood within this transnational context, rather than merely a national one.

Our report focuses on radicalization in the context of the transnational insurgency that is the global extremist “jihadi” Salafist movement, perhaps best exemplified by al Qaeda but including other groups ascribing to the same ideology. Radicalization is




defined as “the process of adopting an extremist belief system, including the willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence, as a method to effect societal change.” Let me note that we have chosen not to use the term “Islamist extremism” in our discussions. Radicalization is not unique to Islam nor is it a new phenomenon. The West is not at war with Islam – terrorism is in fact un-Islamic. This finding is mirrored in a recent poll of the Muslim world, which indicates that large majorities in some countries – from 65% in Indonesia to 88% in Egypt – view violence against civilians as violating Islamic principles. Further, extremists have misappropriated the concept of jihad, using it – wrongly – to justify acts of violence. Therefore, wherever cited in our report or my testimony, the words “jihad” and “jihadi” will appear in quotes.

The Internet facilitates radicalization because it is without peer as a tool for both active and passive communication and outreach. The global extremist “jihadi” Salafist movement was quick to recognize this and adopt a sophisticated media posture. Indeed, al Qaeda as we now know it is as much an inspirational as an operational force, and the movement it has spawned is fuelled by ideology propagated in a range of ways from simple word of mouth to complex technological means. Extremists value the Internet so highly that some have adopted the slogan “keyboard equals Kalashnikov.”

Terrorist groups now have their own media production arms (al Qaeda relies on As-Sahab and the Global Islamic Media Front, for example). Terrorists produce their own television programs and stations, websites, chat rooms, online forums, video games, videos, songs, and radio broadcasts. Through these media, terrorists have woven a tale of an imaginary “clash of civilizations” in which, supposedly, a monolithic West has been engaged in an aggressive struggle against a monolithic Islam since the time of the Crusades. The messaging is meant to resonate with a younger generation, and reinterpret Islam to suit the agenda of the global extremist “jihadi” Salafist movement. Muslims are told that Islam is under siege, that only adherence to the terrorists’ ideology can save it, and that they have a personal duty to commit violence in defense of Islam.

Our adversaries comprise a global, transnational insurgency. To prevail against it, we must win in the battle for hearts and minds, remove terrorist masterminds, and offer hope and opportunity to those who might otherwise be seduced by the “jihadi” ideology. We have entered a new phase of this struggle and must rethink our strategy




as a result. Military activities and hunting down individual terrorists are alone insufficient.

Work is already underway around the world to combat radicalization. In Indonesia, for example, rock star Ahmad Dhani uses both his music and his stardom to counter calls to violence with a message of peace and tolerance. In Jordan, 170 leading Muslim clerics came together in 2005 to issue a *fatwa* (Islamic legal pronouncement) in Amman denouncing all acts of terrorism committed in the name of Islam. In Yemen, the government has sought to reform imprisoned terrorists through theological debate. Members of the Committee for Dialogue, composed of senior clerics and ministers, meet with prisoners and attempt to convince the extremists that there is no basis in Islam for terrorism. Those who accept the clerics' arguments are re-integrated into Yemeni society; according to the government, as of June 2005, 364 individuals had been rehabilitated and released. In Saudi Arabia, the government has aired documentaries featuring renunciations of terrorism by former "jihadis," placed banners and signs throughout the capital that depict the human costs of terrorism, and even utilized terrorist websites to communicate directly with the extremists, attempting to engage in dialogue with them in order to convince them to renounce their radical beliefs.

Efforts are also already underway here at home. Immediately following September 11, 2001, a fatwa condemning terrorism and extremism was issued by American Muslim jurists and ultimately was endorsed by more than one hundred and twenty U.S. Muslim groups, leaders and institutions. In 2005, the Fiqh Council of North America, comprised of Islamic scholars from the United States and Canada, issued a fatwa against terrorism and extremism. Within government, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)'s Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties has produced "an intensive training DVD for DHS personnel who interact with Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and people from the broader Arab and Muslim world." The logic underlying this tool is simple but forceful, namely, that members of these communities will "be treated with more dignity and professionalism if front-line officers understand their cultures, traditions and values..."

Admittedly, some of these measures may be limited in their ability to counteract the impact of the extremist narrative, which is being accepted and adopted by an important minority around the world. It is also important to recognize that certain countries and institutions may be sending mixed messages by simultaneously



engaging or acquiescing in other activities that would seem to undercut the efforts referenced. A key task will be to identify those already working successfully against radicalization, coordinate their activities and new counter-tactics in a comprehensive strategy, and identify best practices that can inform new approaches. As our adversaries operate transnationally, so too must our responses be international and transnational in nature.

Part of the solution lies within the Muslim community itself. Unless both the counter-messages and those who deliver it come from within, the counter-narrative will be deemed inauthentic and untrustworthy, and will fail to resonate. While there may be a role for governments to play by helping, at arm's length, to amplify these voices emanating from the grassroots level, the challenge lies in figuring out how to do so without tainting the credibility of either the message or the messenger.

Covert work, an important component of our counter-strategy, may yield results, as is true in the context of other criminal investigations. Through careful and patient effort, it is possible that an intelligence officer posing as a sympathizer could infiltrate an online extremist community. While remaining cognizant of civil liberties, “[t]he public nature of...chat rooms mitigates the need for informed consent.” Seeds of confusion, doubt and distrust could then be planted in order to chip away at the ties that bind individual extremists into a cohesive and dangerous group. Terrorist susceptibility to psychological manipulation should not be discounted or underestimated. The infamous Abu Nidal, for instance, was ultimately brought down by such measures, which fostered and magnified concerns in his own mind about the loyalty and discipline of those surrounding him. Without loyalty, the system of trust – the glue that binds terrorist organizations together – collapses.

Drawing on the collective knowledge of recognized specialists in religion, psychology, information technology, communications, law, intelligence matters, and other fields, we offer a five-pronged plan that contains a range of ideas to guide our response postures both online and offline, and heighten their effectiveness. These proposals are informed by three key themes: how and why individuals are influenced via CMC; the need to counter extremist speech with an effective counter-narrative that challenges extremist ideology and offers an alternative to those who feel alienated and marginalized; and the importance of intelligence work to inform counterterrorism and the counter-narrative.

## *Key Recommendations*

### **1. Craft a Compelling Counter-Narrative for Worldwide Delivery, in Multimedia, At and By the Grassroots Level**

*Challenge extremist “doctrine.”* The global extremist “jihadi” Salafist movement propagates misinformation and distorts genuine theological tenets for the purpose of expanding the movement’s ranks and energizing its base. These myths and falsehoods must be debunked and discredited. The price paid in blood by Muslims has been high: “Muslim terrorists have usually killed more Muslims than Jews or Christians.” Qur’anic passages such as “the sword verse” (9:5) are wrongly invoked to justify acts of violence.

*Offer a compelling narrative that pulls potential extremists back from the brink.* A narrative will only appeal if it resonates with an individual’s personal experience. Creation and distribution of a counter-narrative should not be confused with efforts to improve America’s image. Rather, the counter-narrative should offer a “dream” in the form of hope and realistically attainable alternative futures to those who might otherwise be seduced by the lure of extremist ideology.

*Use graphic visuals to magnify the impact of language.* Footage of dead children. Images of the carnage of other innocents whose lives were cut short by terrorism. Distasteful as this may be to invoke, the power of visuals is profound. They can enhance exponentially the impact of the written or spoken word. Our adversaries have not hesitated to rely on this tactic to inspire others to join the extremist cause. Where appropriate, we should fight fire with fire.

*Build on core values common to all.* Non-extremists everywhere, no matter their religious or political stripe, hold dear certain universal values such as “respect for the law, freedom of speech, equality of opportunity, respect for others, and responsibility towards others.” What unites us is indeed greater than what divides us and the counter-narrative must emphasize this crucial point.

*Amplify and augment non-extremist voices emanating from the grassroots.* Many Islamic clergy members and scholars have stated, for instance, that Islam expressly forbids attacks against civilians and suicide bombings. However, these and other messages of moderation are simply not being heard and noticed to the same degree as

their extremist counterpart. More such speech is needed and, to magnify it, resources should be provided where necessary.

*Authentic sources must deliver the message.* Unless elements of the counter-narrative emanate from within the Muslim community and are conveyed by voices that are trusted and credible within those communities, the opportunity to achieve impact will be limited at best. For example, Radio Free Europe was created by and for Polish dissidents who possessed a thorough understanding of the many facets of the issues at play and could use effective satire as part of their counter-narrative. Another authentic messenger may, in fact, be former extremists who publicly repudiate those beliefs and reject their previous existence. Testimonials and renunciations, broadcast on television or the Internet, may prove persuasive and resonate with youth in particular. To the extent that we can, we should foster opportunities that facilitate an exit from terrorist groups.

- 1. Foster Intra- and Cross-Cultural Dialogue and Understanding to Strengthen the Ties that Bind Together Communities at the Local, National, and International Levels**

*Address perceptions and realities of American Muslim alienation and marginalization.* It has been argued that “the United States may be one of the most religious nations on earth but Americans know woefully little about their own religions, or the religions of others.” Such ignorance has profound implications as we seek to increase dialogue and further integrate Muslim communities within the U.S. The genuine sense of alienation and marginalization that many Muslims in the United States feel must be addressed. Greater civic engagement of Muslim communities will further enable integration as appropriate.

*Civic Engagement.* Democracies are by their very nature inclusionary, and national and domestic security policy debates, forums, and activities will benefit by ensuring that American Muslims are part of such discussions. At the federal level, a promising, yet underfunded and under-resourced effort is that of the DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties. Responsible for engaging with American Arab and Muslim communities nationwide, the Office has only a Director and two full-time employees. At the community level, examples of civic engagement include involvement of American Muslims in efforts to “Train the Trainers” in Community Emergency Response Training (CERT) in the state of Michigan. A first step was to translate the CERT Instructor Guide into Arabic. Another model of engagement with Muslim



communities is the Tulsa, Oklahoma Citizen Corps Council's Language – Cultural Bank that brings together individuals with foreign language skills or multicultural experiences in a volunteer capacity to assist community agencies with disaster response, emergency preparedness, and crisis management.

*People to People Exchanges.* While more pronounced in Europe, Muslim communities on both sides of the Atlantic share feelings of estrangement. People-to-people exchanges can open minds, undermine stereotypes that feed violent ideologies, and reduce alienation by creating new forums for discussion. A successful bilateral approach to further efforts to promote cross-cultural understanding was that of the U.S. Embassy in Brussels and the Belgian Royal Institute's conference with Belgian and American Muslims titled "Muslim Communities Participating in Society: A Belgian-U.S. Dialogue." Initiated by Ambassador Tom Korologos, and co-sponsored by the Royal Institute for International Relations, the conference used mediated dialogue "to work together to break stereotypes and foster networking opportunities" with the goal of identifying best practices "for improving the participation of Muslim communities in Belgian and American societies." Similar benefits can be achieved through international student exchange and scholarship programs, such as the Fulbright Scholarship.

*Role of the Media.* The media can play a major role by covering stories and events when groups speak out against extremist elements and messaging, and by taking care to use Islamic terms appropriately.

- 1. Recognize and Address the Need for Additional Behavioral Science Research into the Process of Radicalization both Online and Offline**

*Deepen our understanding of the process of radicalization to further inform counter-strategy.* Greater study of the process of radicalization is needed, in part to identify trigger points and possible points of intervention. This will require a multi-disciplinary approach, drawing on experts in fields ranging from sociology to psychology to religion to socio-economics to law enforcement.

*Apply social networking theory.* Social network analysis will serve as an important tool to assist us in making sense of the various connections within a terror network. As one former analyst explains, "[t]errorist organizations do not have organizational charts, they have relationships and if you can understand those relationships, you have gained valuable intelligence."

## 1. Deny or Disrupt Extremist Access to, and Extremist Efforts through, the Internet via Legal and Technical Means, and Covert Action, Where Appropriate

*Invoke the full force of the law where it makes most sense to do so.* Legal means for disrupting extremist use of the Internet may be useful against websites that directly advocate violence or provide material support to known terrorist organizations, crossing the line from protected speech to illegal acts of violence.


*The convergence of human intelligence and cyberspace must be fully appreciated and skillfully exploited in the Information Age.* The intelligence community should work to gather information about extremist groups through their online activities, and act – at an appropriate or judicious time – to disrupt the plans of those plotting acts of violence. More intelligence officers are needed for a range of purposes, to include infiltrating chat rooms, recruiting individuals and conducting false flag operations.

*Undermine the trust that binds enemy networks.* “Honey pot” websites that resemble the extremists’ own would simultaneously permit the gathering of information about visitors to the site while enabling counterterrorism personnel to sow the seeds of doubt and distrust among extremists. Honey pots could allow us to better understand how local political grievances can become appropriated by the global extremist “jihadi” Salafist movement, which in turn can inform a counter-strategy to drive wedges between and among factions, thereby playing on existing fault lines.

### 1. Remedy Resource and Capability Gaps in Government

*Address deficits in linguistic and cultural knowledge, skills and abilities.* The ability to speak, understand and translate Arabic is crucial to prevention and response efforts, yet U.S. government capacities in that regard are much weaker than they should be.

*Choose words carefully to reclaim the high ground.* Ill-chosen words and expressions by governments and institutions are used in extremist propaganda to further radicalize potential adherents. We have ceded the high ground to terrorist networks by adopting their preferred vocabulary, and thereby inadvertently serving their interests. In crafting a counter-narrative, words and concepts must be chosen carefully to avoid bestowing on our adversaries qualities such as honor and nobility that they so clearly do not embody.



*Remedy the lack of a strategic communications plan.* There currently exists no comprehensive well-informed strategy for effectively articulating an anti-extremist message. The U.S. State Department has a “small digital outreach team,” which “monitor[s] Arabic political discussion forums on the Internet and...overtly participate[s] in them in an effort to correct misperceptions about U.S. policy in the Middle East.” But no single organization or institution either within the government or outside of it is capable of managing this effort alone. Instead, a decentralized network of networks must be established that links and coordinates efforts by a variety of actors, both public and private. Multiple government agencies must be budgeted according to their mission in order to build an anti-extremist messaging capability.

*Expand community policing programs.* At the local level, law enforcement must develop new relationships and deepen existing ones within Muslim communities. Local figures are best placed to identify radicalization at its earliest stages. Cultivated mutual respect and understanding between officials and communities, founded on a solid education about Muslim cultures and Islam, is crucial.

In closing, I would like to recognize the Committee and your highly professional staff. On behalf of the task force, we commend the Committee and staff for taking the time to examine this threat proactively, for probing and asking the hard questions about the battlefield and the underlying issues at play, and for trying to better understand our adversaries. I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.

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