HEARING OF THE PERMANENT SUBCOMMITTEE ON INVESTIGATIONS
"ISIS ONLINE: COUNTERING TERRORIST RADICALIZATION & RECRUITMENT ON THE INTERNET & SOCIAL MEDIA"
JULY 6, 2016

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN ROB PORTMAN

This hearing will come to order.

When the Subcommittee began planning this hearing, we did not know it would fall just three weeks after the most deadly terrorist attack on American soil since September 11, 2001. The evil terrorist attack in Orlando last month that targeted the LGBT community was yet another reminder of the urgent need to reexamine and redouble our government's efforts to combat violent Islamic jihadism both at home and abroad — and particularly to disrupt and ultimately destroy the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS. There is no room for complacency on this issue. It warrants continuous scrutiny and oversight from Congress as our government's understanding of the enemy evolves.

ISIS specializes in savagery—violence inspired by delusions of sectarian conquest from another age. Yet it has effectively deployed modern technology of the information age to spread its propaganda and recruit killers to its cause. ISIS has developed a sophisticated information warfare capability. It has pioneered a distinctive strategy of targeted online recruitment, while disseminating sleek viral videos and messages, primarily from two media centers, al-Hayat and al-Furqan through a constantly evolving set of online platforms. As FBI Director James Comey has noted, even if we are able to keep foreign terrorists *physically* out of the United States, online communication and social media allow ISIS to "enter as a photon and radicalize somebody in Wichita, Kansas." ISIS has weaponized online propaganda in a new and lethal way.

The damage wrought by that weapon is considerable. Orlando—49 dead. San Bernardino—14 dead. Fort Hood—13 dead. The Boston Marathon—3 dead and hundreds wounded. Each of these killers was

reportedly radicalized to some degree by online jihadist content. And so many other attacks inspired by means of social media have been thwarted. Indeed, experts tell us that throughout last year, social media played some part in radicalization of all 60 people arrested in the United States for criminal acts in support of ISIS. Most recently, of course, the FBI has publicly stated that it is "highly confident" that the Orlando killer Omar Mateen was "radicalized at least in part through the Internet."

One longstanding aim of the ISIS propaganda machine is to attract foreign fighters to ISIS-controlled territory. Often ISIS tells its recruits tales of high adventure, joined with false narratives of an Islamic extremist utopia. The bizarre images behind me, for example, appear in a ISIS film exhorting Muslims around the world to join the Islamic State; rather than show ISIS fighters for what they are — murderers of innocent victims who are themselves *overwhelmingly* Muslim — they are shown playing with laughing children and shopping in local marketplaces. Appeals like these have helped draw an estimated 30,000 foreign fighters, including at least 6,000 Westerners, to take up arms with ISIS. The good news is that the Defense Department reports a significant decrease in the flow of foreign fighters to ISIS territory. At the same time, however, ISIS has increasingly *shifted* its propaganda efforts to inciting sympathizers to commit acts of terror in the West—including in the United States.

Online propaganda, amplified by social media and peer-to-peer communication, is now a key weapon in ISIS's arsenal. We should, of course, resist over-simplifying the problem. Not all radicalization in the United States occurs online, and in-person interaction often reinforces the process. But unlike the more common European pattern of jihadist radicalization in clusters or in prison, the U.S. threat so far is predominantly that of the lone wolf terrorist—an individual radicalized on his own, often in front of his computer screen with access to online jihadist content and videos that create a kind of virtual training camp.

In addition to a clear military strategy and vigilant law enforcement efforts here at home, the United States and our allies need a more robust, coordinated strategy to expose the enemy's lies, counter its false narratives, and encourage credible voices to tell the truth to

those most susceptible or receptive to ISIS's lies. And that is true both of foreign and U.S. audiences. Although the ISIS online radicalization threat is well-recognized, there is a range of opinion on how best to *combat* it, and U.S. government efforts are still in early stages. Today we will examine the counter-messaging initiatives that show promise— and where the U.S. government has fallen short and could accelerate its efforts.

In January, the State Department began a revamp of its counterterrorism messaging and coordination efforts with the launch of the Global Engagement Center—a better funded and (at least on paper) more empowered version of its predecessor, the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications. Previous efforts to address this threat have struggled to overcome bureaucratic hurdles, unclear authorities, and a lack of interagency communication and unity of effort. These structural deficiencies will continue to hinder future administrations—both Republican and Democrat—unless they are addressed. That is why I recently introduced legislation with Senator Murphy to help resolve some of these issues and the impact they have on our ability not only to counter propaganda and disinformation from extremist groups like ISIS but also the equally pressing challenges posed by state-sponsored propaganda from countries like Russia and China.

The Department of Homeland Security also recently consolidated its countering-violent-extremism or CVE efforts in a new Office of Community Partnerships. We'll be hearing more about those efforts in our first panel today, and I will be interested in exploring whether these initiatives are backed by sufficient authorities and resources.

In addition, social media firms including Facebook and Twitter have stepped up their voluntary efforts to police their own terms of service, which prohibit incitements to terrorism. Twitter has closed more than 100,000 ISIS-linked accounts, and Facebook has actively worked to remove offending users while working in various ways to promote content to counter jihadist propaganda. Those actions have helped to degrade ISIS's social media megaphone, according to the Middle East Media Research Institute, but its online presence remains strong.

Let's be very clear: To defeat ISIS, it is necessary to destroy the enemy where they live and prosper — in Iraq and Syria, and in their major cells around the world. Online counter-messaging is no substitute for a clearly defined and vigorously executed military strategy. But a military strategy must be reinforced by a coordinated effort to undermine and disrupt the powerful disinformation spread by Islamic jihadists. Today, we will be hearing from three federal agencies involved in that effort, as well as a distinguished panel of experts who have been engaged on these issues for many years.

With that, I will turn to Senator McCaskill for her opening statement.