



Committee on
HOMELAND SECURITY
Chairman Michael McCaul

Opening Statement

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**Statement of Chairman Michael McCaul (R-Texas)
Committee on Homeland Security**

“Terrorism Gone Viral: The Attack in Garland, Texas and Beyond”

Remarks as Prepared

Just yesterday in Boston, reports are emerging that Usaama Rahim, who was killed by federal law enforcement officers after lunging at them with a knife, was being investigated by the Boston Joint Terrorism Task Force after communicating with and spreading ISIS propaganda online. Known associates of Rahim are also being arrested. These cases are a reminder of the dangers posed by individuals radicalized through social media.

In Garland one month ago, Elton Simpson fired off a series of tweets declaring his loyalty to the Islamic State and urging others to do the same. Simpson included a hashtag “TexasAttack”—previewing his decision to terrorize the Prophet Mohammad cartoon contest that Islamists on social media had singled out as a target. In his final tweet sent minutes before the attack, Simpson told his followers to follow Junaid Hussain, a 20-year old British foreign fighter embedded with ISIS in Syria and one of the group’s top recruiters who has been linked to the CENTCOM Twitter hack in January of this year.

Hussain was quick to praise the Garland attack and issued a warning that same night: “The knives have been sharpened; soon we will come to your streets with death and slaughter!” This attack exemplifies a new era in which terrorism has gone viral.

Extremists issued a “call to arms” to attack an event, a radicalized follower clearly heeded that call, and he took steps to make sure his act of violence would spread and motivate more. Social media networks have become an extension of the Islamist terror battlefields overseas, turning homegrown extremists into sleeper operatives and attackers.

The proliferation of jihadist propaganda online has established a new front in our battle against Islamist extremists. We are no longer hunting terrorists living in caves who only communicate through couriers. We are facing an enemy whose messages and calls to violence are posted and promoted in real-time.

For example, last month, the threat level at military bases across the country was elevated after ISIS supporters posted the names of individuals serving in the military online and quickly spread on social media.

Aspiring fanatics can receive updates from hardcore extremists on the ground in Syria via Twitter, watch ISIS bloodlust on YouTube, view jihadi selfies on Instagram, read religious justifications for murder on JustPasteIt, and find travel guides to the battlefield on Ask.fm. Jihadi recruiters are mastering the ability to monitor, and prey upon, Western youth susceptible to the twisted message of Islamist terror. They seek out curious users who have questions about Islam or want to know what life is like in the so-called Islamic State. They engage, establish bonds of trust, and assess the commitment of their potential recruits.

From there, extremists direct users to continue the conversation on more secure apps, where secure communication hides their messages from our intelligence agencies. Such communications can include advice for traveling to terror safe havens, contact information for smugglers in Turkey, or the membership process for joining ISIS itself.

I know the officials appearing before us today are disturbed by these trends. Mobile apps like Kik and WhatsApp—as well as data-destroying apps like Wickr and Surespot—are allowing extremists to communicate outside of the view of law enforcement. Equally as worrisome are ISIS attempts to use the “Dark” or “Deep Web.”

These websites hide IP addresses and cannot be reached by search engines, giving terrorists another covert means by which they can recruit fighters, share intelligence, raise funds, and potentially plot and direct attacks undetected.

ISIS tailors its message for specific audiences around the globe and, in doing so, projects power far beyond its growing safe havens by amplifying its battlefield successes and winning over new converts across the world. Its media sophistication helps legitimize its self-proclaimed Caliphate and its perverse interpretation of Islam.

This stands in stark contrast to al Qaeda’s past outreach, which relied on tightly controlled, top-down messaging and propaganda more difficult for aspiring jihadists to find. Today, ISIS is instead taking a “grassroots” approach to terror, seeding its repressive worldview from the ground up.

From digital magazines to online videos that glorify barbaric murder, ISIS is using its multi-platform engagement to create a jihadi subculture that supports its violent ideology and encourages attacks against the United States and its allies. Their tactics are a sea change for spreading terror, and they require from us a paradigm shift in our counterterrorism intelligence and operations.

For example, we can start by doing what FBI Director Comey suggested—“shaking [the] trees more aggressively”—to quickly identify and engage potential homegrown jihadis. But this is a dynamic new front in the war against Islamist terror, and it will require a new approach with a heavy focus on the ideological battle space.

I am grateful to have three witnesses today that are dealing firsthand with how terror is going viral. I look forward to hearing their testimony and recommendations for confronting this challenge.

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