

**Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),  
Ranking Member, Senate Judiciary Committee,  
Hearing before the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on  
Oversight, Agency Action, Federal Rights and Federal Courts  
On “Willful Blindness:**

**Consequences of Agency Efforts To Deemphasize Radical Islam in Combating Terrorism”  
June 28, 2016**

Today’s hearing comes 16 days after one of the worst mass shootings in our nation’s history. The massacre of 49 innocent people in an attack on an LGBT nightclub in Orlando is a national tragedy. It is also yet another horrific example of what can happen when a troubled individual with ready access to firearms succumbs to violent extremism.

The Orlando shooting appears to have been inspired by ISIS and its twisted propaganda. This barbaric group is a serious threat to this country and we must do all that we can to protect the American people. But keeping our country safe requires us to move beyond empty rhetoric and talking points. It means properly funding our national security and law enforcement agencies. It means passing meaningful legislation to keep firearms away from terrorists, criminals, and those suffering from serious mental illness. And it also means countering the appeal of violent, extremist ideologies.

But to properly confront the threat, we cannot be blind to the reality that violent extremism is a much broader problem. Over the past several years, we have seen deadly mass shootings by an ISIS-inspired extremist in San Bernardino, California; by an anti-abortion extremist at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs, Colorado; by a white supremacist at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina; by a Ku Klux Klan member at a Jewish community center in Kansas City, Kansas; and by a neo-Nazi at a Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. We must affirmatively reject all forms of violent extremism.

But it is dangerous to cast suspicion on our neighbors and fellow citizens simply because they belong to a particular religious, ethnic, or racial group. I have been shocked to hear repeated calls to ban Muslims from entering into this country, to surveil mosques, and to patrol Muslim American communities. And I was even more stunned to hear someone who wishes to be President of the United States insinuate that all Muslim Americans are somehow complicit or had knowledge of the Orlando attack. That is abhorrent and shameful.

This kind of rhetoric makes us less safe. It feeds right into the warped narrative and worldview of groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda. It also feeds into the rhetoric of anti-Muslim hate groups and encourages hate crimes at home. National security and law enforcement officials -- from FBI Director James Comey, to former CIA Director Michael Hayden, to New York Police Commissioner William Bratton -- have rightfully and forcefully denounced this type of fear mongering. They have made clear that it sends exactly the wrong message to the world, serves as a recruitment tool for ISIS and other hate groups, and puts our national security at risk.

Worse yet, this type of toxic and divisive rhetoric is fundamentally un-American. It harkens back to shameful moments in our Nation’s history. It is a reminder of the Chinese Exclusion

Act. The internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. The blacklists and baseless suspicion of Jews during the Red Scare. And of the McCarthy hearings.

Those were grave mistakes that will forever mar our history. They are a reminder of what can happen when an entire community is demonized and fear is used to sow seeds of hatred and division between citizens and neighbors.

Unfortunately, some of the witnesses that Republicans have invited to testify today have themselves engaged in this very kind of dangerous rhetoric. They have sought to cast suspicion on prominent and patriotic Muslim Americans, going so far as to accuse former State Department official Huma Abedin of somehow being an operative of the Muslim Brotherhood and having ties to terrorism. I am disappointed these same witnesses are using today's hearing to spew equally ugly rhetoric against organizations that serve as important voices on a range of issues, national security among them. It demeans this committee for such aspersions to be given a forum here. I hope Republicans will join me in denouncing these baseless accusations. Senator Graham has rightly called previous attacks against Ms. Abedin "ridiculous" and stated that "people who say these things are really doing her a disservice because they don't know what they're talking about, and I don't know what their motivations are, but clearly it says more about them than it does her." I agree. It has no place in our discourse and should have no place in the United States Senate. We are better than this.

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