



# New national terrorism strategy a step in the right direction

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September 27, 2016 3:15 pm | *AEIdeas*

Last week, House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Michael McCaul [released “A National Strategy to Win the War Against Islamist Terror” at an AEI event](#) (<https://www.aei.org/events/winning-the-war-against-islamist-terror-a-conversation-with-chairman-michael-mccaul/>). In the [strategy](#) (<https://homeland.house.gov/press/chairman-mccaul-unveils-counterterrorism-strategy-national-strategy-win-war-islamist-terror/>), Chairman McCaul notes that “extremists are crowd-sourcing their violence and franchising terror to small cells and independent followers” and associating with “transnational criminal groups to smuggle fighters, goods, and weapons across the borders.” These new trends require a shift in strategy by the United States.

Chairman McCaul rightly focuses on the use of encrypted technology by terrorists to recruit, communicate, plan, and execute attacks. The strategy again requests Congress to “establish a national digital security commission to bring together key stakeholders, including technologists, privacy and civil liberties groups, academics, intelligence leaders, and the law enforcement community to find common ground to deal with the ‘going dark’ phenomenon.”



<http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/RTSJ1LI->

[e1475003251641.jpg](#))

Police investigate the scene near an SUV in which a man suspected of causing a bomb scare barricaded himself in New York City, July 21, 2016. REUTERS/Brendan McDermid.

In conjunction with the commission concept I [outlined here](https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/National-commission-on-terrorists-use-of-technology-is-needed.pdf) (<https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/National-commission-on-terrorists-use-of-technology-is-needed.pdf>), Chairman McCaul also endorsed [my policy recommendation](https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Human-Intelligence.pdf) (<https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Human-Intelligence.pdf>) to significantly increase our human intelligence (HUMINT) capabilities in local law enforcement. His strategy calls for “developing new approaches for lawfully monitoring terror suspects, as well as putting greater emphasis on the use of human intelligence.” By engaging in more HUMINT, we can overcome, to a degree, the loss of our signals intelligence collection capabilities due to encryption.

Chairman McCaul’s endorsement of [my policy concept](https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Create-Regional-Outreach-Groups.pdf) (<https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Create-Regional-Outreach-Groups.pdf>) on using federal funds to create Regional Outreach Groups to strengthen relations and build trust between law enforcement and the Muslim community also makes sense given the new terrorism trends we are facing. As he stated, we need to “bolster... work with communities to promote see-something-say-something campaigns, including expanding them beyond large metropolitan areas. However, these public awareness efforts must be made geographically relevant, kept up-to-date with changes in the threat environment, and provide easy reporting options.” Achieving those broad policy goals could be executed by establishing, at minimum, [24 Regional Outreach Groups](https://www.aei.org/multimedia/countering-terrorism-through-outreach/) (<https://www.aei.org/multimedia/countering-terrorism-through-outreach/>) spread across America’s most at-risk metropolitan areas.

Though he didn’t specify the details, Chairman McCaul’s call for reforming the National Security Council is a critical step to ensure America’s policies stay one-step ahead of our adversaries. As [I’ve outlined](https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Giving-States-and-Localities-a-Voice-in-Washington.pdf) (<https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Giving-States-and-Localities-a-Voice-in-Washington.pdf>), part of this reform must include adding permanent seats for state and local representatives to make sure that our national policies bring to bear their experience and resources. National Security is “national,” not “federal,” and should make use of state and local resources. Likewise, Chairman McCaul’s call for streamlining Congress’s oversight function of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is spot-on. The current oversight by more than 80 committees in Congress creates “a fractured system that results in waste, overlap, and duplication and stymies legislative efforts to make America safe.” Our bureaucracy aids our enemies.

**Learn more:** [Enhanced Human Intelligence Is Key to Defeating Terrorists](http://www.aei.org/publication/enhanced-human-intelligence-is-key-to-defeating-terrorists/) (<http://www.aei.org/publication/enhanced-human-intelligence-is-key-to-defeating-terrorists/>)

Finally, Chairman McCaul called for the federal government to “expand its Visa Security Program to conduct security reviews of visa applicants earlier in the process and in greater depth... and pilot use of deception-detection technologies in the visa interview process and hire more native speakers to conduct interviews.” As he noted, “[d]espite recent changes, more can also be done to improve the security of the Visa Waiver Program (VWP), which allows citizens of certain countries to travel visa-free to the United States.” One idea Chairman McCaul highlighted was “requiring VWP countries to conduct standard counter terrorism checks on all travelers and immigrants entering and exiting their territory, to

conduct advanced targeting of airline passenger manifests and related data, to implement secure real-time intelligence sharing tools with us.” As I [noted](https://www.aei.org/publication/dhs-collect-fingerprints-before-visitors-depart-for-america/) (<https://www.aei.org/publication/dhs-collect-fingerprints-before-visitors-depart-for-america/>) in the [Wall Street Journal](http://www.wsj.com/articles/its-too-easy-for-terrorists-1449705080) (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/its-too-easy-for-terrorists-1449705080>), such changes are critical to preventing terrorists from getting into America, especially as document fraud skyrockets in Europe.

Unfortunately, Chairman McCaul didn’t get everything right in his strategy. Specifically, while recognizing that “a data-point lost in the noise might be the key to disrupting a violent attack,” he fails to appreciate the ongoing problem America faces having two entities at the state and local level engaged in information and intelligence gathering, analysis, and sharing. As I noted, we [need to consolidate the DHS fusion centers and FBI Joint Terrorism Task Forces](https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Fusion-Center.pdf) (<https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Fusion-Center.pdf>) to ensure intelligence gets to the right people. A bifurcated system only increases the odds that key data in one entity do not make it to the other entity, thereby preventing our dedicated intelligence personnel from fully connecting the dots.

Similarly, his call for DHS fusion centers to engage in community outreach and countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts is misplaced. In his strategy, Chairman McCaul states that:

agencies should use the existing nationwide network of fusion centers to expand threat awareness briefings and should pilot confidential tip lines to allow members of the public to report concerns, not just about suspicious activity (as noted earlier) but about possible terrorist radicalization in their communities.

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If fusion centers are to exist and operate as information and intelligence entities, they also cannot attempt to engage in community outreach or CVE activities, as such efforts will be met with suspicion and likely lead to accusations of spying, undermining both their community outreach and intelligence responsibilities. Community outreach has long been a practice of local law enforcement because they have the relationships and expertise in navigating touchy issues across the various communities they deal with on a daily basis. It is vital that we separate intelligence activities and community outreach activities.

Lastly, though the details were thin, Chairman McCaul missed an opportunity to sketch out real reforms on airport screening by the Transportation Security Administration. I’d respectfully submit we need to move past the regime established after the 9/11 attack. It is time to end the screening of Americans who clearly don’t present a threat to our air security. Rather than double-down on the current system that misses component bomb parts, irritates Americans, and drives our costs to secure America higher without a return on that investment, Congress should consider changing course with common sense measures aimed at freeing the tens of millions Americans who pose no risk. It is time for us to screen Grandma Emma and little Billy differently than we screen people whose travel, activities, behaviors, and other indicators indicate may pose a threat.

All-in-all, Chairman McCaul’s strategy is a step in the right direction. Let’s hope his colleagues in Congress heed his advice.

**Learn more:** [Consolidate Domestic Intelligence Entities Under the FBI](http://www.aei.org/publication/consolidate-domestic-intelligence-entities-under-the-fbi/)  
(<http://www.aei.org/publication/consolidate-domestic-intelligence-entities-under-the-fbi/>)  
| [Enhanced Human Intelligence Is Key to Defeating Terrorists](http://www.aei.org/publication/enhanced-human-intelligence-is-key-to-defeating-terrorists/)  
(<http://www.aei.org/publication/enhanced-human-intelligence-is-key-to-defeating-terrorists/>)  
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