

Statement of Robert W. Jenkins, Assistant to the Administrator for the Bureau of Conflict Prevention and Stabilization Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Global Human Rights the Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism September 28, 2021

INTRODUCTION

Chair Bass, Chair Deutch, Ranking Member Smith, Ranking Member Wilson, members of the subcommittees, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. No matter how we look at the problem of violent extremists and conflict in Africa, trends are moving in the wrong direction. A recent report by the International Committee of the Red Cross tallied 296 non-state armed groups in sub-Saharan Africa. In the Sahel alone, a database of attacks conducted by armed groups counts 410 attacks between April and June of this year—the highest number of attacks in a tracked quarter. Earlier this year, the United Nations reported violence had displaced over 2 million residents of Sahelian countries within their own borders, four times the number of displaced recorded in 2019. These data give a sense of the scale of growing violence.

Across the African continent, USAID sees several states that appear particularly fragile, with weak governments characterized by corruption and lack of accountability, youth bulges, unprofessional security forces, limited services and opportunities for citizens, intercommunal conflicts, and armed groups looking to recruit. On top of these factors, African countries also grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic—an event that not only places already weak health systems under strain but also reduces the overall presence of states, exacerbates social fragmentation, creates economic hardship, and opens spaces for armed groups to exploit. Climate change will take a particularly strong toll on several African countries, prompting increased competition and opening fissures between communities. Meanwhile, democratic governance—the best mechanism to identify peaceful solutions to political problems, including those underpinning much of this violence—is under assault, with several extra-constitutional changes in government in recent history. These diverse conflicts and societal fractures in turn give international terrorist groups opportunities to exploit, recruit, and perpetuate existing conflict. Under those conditions, we can expect violent extremism to remain a problem for the foreseeable future.

USAID invests resources in countering violent extremism (CVE) to serve U.S. national security interests by supporting peace, prosperity, and stability overseas and reducing threats to Americans at home and abroad. In 2020, with the support of Congress, USAID launched the Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization, creating a bureaucratic structure in the Agency for all issues related to preventing and stabilizing violent conflict, including violence perpetrated by violent extremist organizations. Earlier this year, when I took charge of this new bureau, it was evident we needed to prioritize a region. We chose West Africa. As a government, we don't always prioritize well, and as a bureau responsible for preventing conflict and stabilizing violence across the globe, some questioned why we would choose West Africa

over some other more obvious places: the Horn of Africa, the Middle East, or Central America. West Africa provided several rationales. Several countries confront high levels of violence by armed groups—arguably as part of civil wars—where central government authority is challenged in large geographic areas. Other countries, especially those along the coast, provide an opportunity and a test for prevention efforts. These countries do not experience anything like the violence of Sahelian states, but the southern spread of the violence, recruitment opportunities, and occasional cross-border attacks give the coastal states reason for concern, all against a backdrop of weakening democratic norms. Not all African states confront a situation where armed violent extremist groups have exploited vulnerabilities and thrived, but in regions where fragility, insecurity, and political conflict build on major grievances (e.g., among underserved Muslim communities) and fuel cycles of violence, armed violent extremist groups can thrive. The scale of the problem, the imperative to prevent the geographic spread of extremist violence, and the development and governance issues contributing to this problem all persuaded us to choose West Africa as the priority.

THE SAHEL

The Sahel provides a striking example of the threats and challenges posed by violent extremists and conflict. In Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Chad, armed groups have challenged states' authority, recruited disaffected youth into their ranks, aligned themselves with groups like Al-Qaida and the Islamic State (IS), and used an extended period of simmering war and violence to grow and expand their influence. Several of these groups have evolved beyond simply carrying out attacks; they now look to fill roles of the state, whether collecting revenue, administering justice, or expanding their recruitment pool (including not just fighters, but also their families).

Even more concerning is the spread of these groups. Countries like Benin and Côte d'Ivoire must now grapple with the risk of attacks and recruitment from violent extremist groups. A decade ago, many of us would not have imagined these scenarios for a place like Ghana. In light of this risk, USAID is investing people and resources in Coastal West African countries with the goal of weakening the appeal and curbing opportunities for violent extremist groups to make inroads in these places. Part of how we should define success in West Africa is by keeping violent extremist groups from challenging governments, recruiting disaffected citizens, and carrying out attacks in coastal states the way they have elsewhere in the region.

EAST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

While the Sahel offers a clear example of how violent extremist groups threaten states, borders cannot contain conflict and armed groups. Throughout 2021, the alarm bells grew louder in northern Mozambique after insurgents with links to the Islamic State orchestrated ongoing attacks in the northern province of Cabo Delgado, culminating in the seizure of Palma in March 2021. By taking the name IS, this insurgency gained experience, guaranteed itself headlines, and developed an international element to its violent struggle.

The Mozambique case illustrates important considerations. For example, the IS label obscures more than it reveals. Rather than a well-established core of committed fighters adhering to IS's global goals, this insurgency recruits and thrives on local conditions. USAID's own research indicates that youth are the most vulnerable demographic to recruitment to violent extremism in northern Mozambique. They are motivated to join the IS branch there because of long-standing grievances against the government and the global success of the IS brand. Limited economic opportunities in Cabo Delgado feed young Mozambicans' frustrated aspirations; they feel they have a limited role and impact on society. They are devoid of hope.

It is an insurgency with its roots in local economic and social grievances with IS branding and support. Take away the IS support and the IS label, and you still have the grievances and conditions for exclusion and violence—conditions which could find violent expressions through other outlets. We see IS and read about the violence, but what we witness are the symptoms of endemic social problems. At its core is an unresolved political and economic dispute (now with the added element of large energy discoveries) in an underserved region.

Elsewhere, in Somalia, Al Shabab continues to make territorial and financial gains in the backdrop of a deeply fractured political environment, evidenced most recently by election delays, dire humanitarian conditions, and continued intercommunal conflict. Al Shabab's increasing revenue stream and growth in power has allowed for more sophisticated attacks. The group has shown itself able to collect tax and revenue streams regardless of whether it owns territory, signaling that a security-driven response with the aim of holding territory will be insufficient to degrade Al Shabab.

In Ethiopia, meanwhile, the political situation boiled over last year into armed conflict; we will soon approach a year since the fighting began. USAID continues to work on the humanitarian response and support vital human rights work, all while the United States pushes for a ceasefire and ultimately an end to the violence.

U.S. INTERESTS

The human toll alone is enough to give us pause, but the proliferation of violent extremist activity, on top of ongoing conflicts already stressing under-capacitated governments with competing interests, in Africa has implications for American security. While USAID supports a rebalanced national-security approach, a profusion of increasingly experienced armed violent extremist groups with links to international terrorist groups still presents risks to Americans, the United States, our interests, allies, and partners.

As violent extremist groups grow, recruit, network, and become more emboldened, so too do the risks to our overseas facilities and potentially Americans. The United States must prepare to confront future threats, but in our recalibration, we must continue to pay attention to the threat posed by violent extremist groups in places like the Sahel.

AN APPROACH FOR THE UNITED STATES

As the case of Mozambique underscores, violent extremist violence often reflects local political, economic, and social schisms rather than the commitment of inveterate ideologues. The high levels of violence perpetrated by these groups under the banners of IS and Al-Qaida prompt us to resort to military solutions, but militaries and security services (American or other) cannot succeed alone. Research on violent extremism in sub-Saharan Africa has shown that absent a comprehensive approach, security and military forces can fuel the problem they ostensibly are trying to solve. In a 2017 [study](#) undertaken by the United Nations Development Programme, the authors found a majority of subjects who joined [violent] extremist groups (71%) pointed to “‘government action’, including ‘killing of a family member or friend’ or ‘arrest of a family member or friend’, as the incident that prompted them to join [an violent extremist group].” This figure underscores a point that practitioners of countering violent extremism have known and advocated for years: where security forces are unprofessional, biased, feared, and/or commit human rights abuses, they often stoke, rather than quell, the forces driving extremist violence. In the African context, any approach must remain conscious of this dynamic and explore alternatives to security-centric responses, balanced with the reality of providing military assistance where necessary.

To succeed, the United States’ approach should rely on a balance of political, security, peacebuilding, and stabilization responses across our diplomatic, defense, and development tools. The United States also cannot achieve results alone. Our efforts must support the national and local governments confronting these problems. The Department of State has a crucial role to play delivering the diplomatic pressure to secure that support, along with finding paths to end some of these conflicts. Likewise, these conflicts, while local in cause, can become global problems, so we will also rely on like-minded governments to work with the United States to address common security concerns and related effects, like unplanned migration. I have recently met with representatives from several European countries who are eager to work with USAID and the Department of State on cooperating to stem the tide of extremist violence in places like Somalia, the Sahel, Mozambique, and elsewhere.

The Department of Defense continues to have a critical role, not only in supporting these same international partners who are providing security assistance to nations, but in working with security forces to provide them with best practices, training. Getting that support right is pivotal if we want progress addressing this challenge; failing to do so creates further risk of alienating populations to the benefit of armed non-state groups. USAID has a close relationship with U.S. Africa Command, a relationship built on the mutual belief in applying defense, diplomacy, and development efforts to advancing American security interests in Africa.

I firmly believe U.S. foreign assistance has a role to play in preventing the expansion of violent extremism in Africa and supporting African countries to manage and transform conflict and violence. Over the years, USAID has come to understand that programming designed to strengthen and influence local institutions and communities systemically is likely to have a greater effect on radicalization and recruitment into violent groups compared to programming designed to address any single particular driver. Part of what our work targets key actors who

prevent the spread of violent extremism. As an example, USAID funds the critical role of women by promoting their participation in peace and security processes while reinforcing community resilience. The Women, Peace, and Security agenda broadens the discourse beyond "traditional" security and has increased recognition that marginalizing women and girls in any framework related to peace and security has produced communal instability, insecurity, and fueled violent extremism. USAID support to local voices also changes the narrative, providing an alternative to storylines pushed by violent extremist groups. Our media messaging programs, which reached an audience of over six million people across West African countries, deliver engaging content to change attitudes away from the appeal of violent extremist groups' narratives. This comes atop USAID's perpetual commitment to improving governance, economic, and development outcomes in all the countries where we work.

When so many causes of violent extremist grievance and recruitment rely on exploiting schisms in society, depressed economic opportunities, and political marginalization, the answer requires long-term, dedicated investment to improve those issues. The Secretary of State said it best in February 2021 when discussing the Sahel, stating "Instability and violence are symptoms of a crisis of state legitimacy." Without the patience to make material changes, the grievances and risks will persist.

A Call to Coordinated Action

The United States has several options moving forward. Many of us who watch Africa have grown more alarmed in recent years at the rapid spread of violent extremism, from thenow affecting not just the Sahel and the Horn, but also, now toward the the West African coast, through the Horn, down the Great Lakes Region, and now along the shores of the Indian Ocean in northern Mozambique. Whereas just a few years ago, the center of attention was on the proliferation of groups in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and elsewhere in the Middle East, African countries are increasingly featured and fill reports on global terrorism. These same countries feature in IS/Al-Qaida propaganda. The United States is waking up to that reality, and Congress can play an amplifying role, as this hearing today demonstrates. Thank you for giving these issues your attention.

We have an opportunity to reverse the trend in part because of the support we have from Congress, most notably the Global Fragility Act (GFA). That Act called for the development of a strategy to prioritize prevention and takes an integrated approach to just these types of problems. I also expect our whole-of-government, including USAID to use the GFA as the catalyst to prompt an unprecedented level of collaboration across the U.S. Government to arrest the growing threats to peace and stability.

For the subcommittees today, I will end with my views on what more Congress could do to help USAID and the rest of the U.S. Government address this problem. One recurring obstacle for USAID is the legal restrictions around how our funding is used and with whom we can reach with programs.

The ever-changing nature of conflicts, evolving armed groups, and shifting geographies would also benefit from increased flexibility in appropriated funding. Our budgeting process takes years—we have already started planning for 2024. USAID and the other parts of the U.S. Government working on this problem can't know with certainty the shape of conflict and needs that far out. We need the flexibility and contingency resources that allow us to adapt as fast as the facts on the ground change. It is a model that has succeeded and one USAID wants to scale to the size of the problem; we appreciate consideration of flexible funds. Similarly, USAID sees great utility in a further conversation on how to improve flexibility in getting our people into the field where they are needed, often side-by-side with Department of Defense and the Department of State colleagues. For all the enthusiasm of an integrated approach between departments and agencies here in Washington, the greatest difference comes in the field, alongside colleagues and international partners fighting together against this clear threat.

Thank you again for convening this important hearing.

<u>Bureau Level Clearances</u>	<u>Clearance Status</u>	<u>Date</u>
LPA/LEG: JFoltz	Clear w/edits	9/22/2021
LPA/LEG: DJaddallah-Redding	Clear w/edits	9/22/2021
LPA/LEG: CBullock	Clear w/edits	9/22/2021
AFR/SD:	Clear w/edits	9/23/2021
PPL/P:	Info	9/23/2021
BHA/OA	Clear w/ edits	9/23/2021
BHA/G3PC	Clear	9/23/2021
CPS/CMC: CKnudsen	Clear w/edit	9/23/2021
CPS/OTI: JGattorn	Clear w/edits	9/22/2021
CPS/CVP: JDrude	Clear	9/23/2021