



**Statement before the House Oversight and Reform
Subcommittee on National Security**

***“U.S. Counterterrorism Priorities and
Challenges in Africa”***

A Testimony by:

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Chairman Lynch, Ranking Member Hice, and distinguished members of the House Oversight and Reform Subcommittee on National Security, thank you for the invitation to speak on a topic of considerable importance to U.S. interests: the terrorism landscape in sub-Saharan Africa.

I believe ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other extremist groups pose a significant threat to U.S. national security and foreign policy interests in sub-Saharan Africa. That said, there is a low probability of a direct attack on the homeland from African extremist groups.

It is more measured to say that terrorism in sub-Saharan Africa endangers U.S. citizens and economic investments abroad, entangles the United States in expensive peacekeeping and humanitarian relief efforts, and weakens U.S. standing and strategic alliances around the world while our foreign adversaries grow in strength and influence.

It is imperative to remain engaged in the region. It has been one of the factors that has prevented attacks on the homeland and slowed the ascent of these groups in the region. However, it is equally important to rethink our investments, interventions, and partnerships to achieve U.S. strategic objectives and advance peace and security in sub-Saharan Africa.

The State of Terrorism in the Region

Sub-Saharan Africa has experienced a rise in terrorism over the past two decades. The threat has become more sophisticated, lethal, and geographically dispersed. Between 2000-2011, the region saw fewer than 500 attacks per year, but incidents shot up to nearly 100 in 2012. Since 2014, the annual number of terrorist attacks has remained at more than 1,500, reaching 1,727 in 2018, according to the Global Terrorism Database.

While Africa's homegrown extremist groups have local objectives and disproportionately target regional governments and civilians, their affiliation with global terrorist networks al-Qaeda and ISIS has contributed to more efficient operations, slicker media propaganda, and increased financial resources in some cases. The terrorist networks, their affiliates, and other extremist groups now operate in West, East, Central, and Southern Africa, having conducted operations in approximately 17 sub-Saharan African countries.

- In Somalia, al-Shabab pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2012 and a faction based in northern Somalia aligned with ISIS in 2015. In recent years, the group has shifted from mass attacks to guerilla warfare tactics, establishing terrorist cells in Mogadishu and controlling some rural areas in south-central Somalia. Al-Shabab offers services—such as adjudicating court cases—to appeal to local communities which have no access to the central government. Al-Shabab also collects taxes from citizens under its control to enrich its coffers. The group also has been responsible for attacks in Kenya, especially in its northern eastern counties and Nairobi.
- In the Sahel, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) was formed in March 2017 as a result of a merger between multiple jihadist groups. It recruits from several ethnic groups, including Tuareg, Fulani, and Arab communities. The UN Security Council says it is “one of [al-Qaeda's] most successful... affiliates”; the group has carried out deadly

attacks against UN peacekeepers, regional soldiers, and French troops, as well as kidnappings, weapons, and drug trafficking. JNIM is formidable in part because it is adept at integrating itself in communities and recruiting disaffected individuals to increase its ranks. The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)—nominally part of ISWAP—operates in the border areas between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. It claimed responsibility for this month’s attack on a Nigerien military garrison in Inates, which left 71 soldiers dead.

- In Nigeria, Boko Haram, led by Abubakar Shekau currently operates near the Sambisa Forest in Nigeria’s Borno State and around Manderu Mountains on the border with Cameroon. It primarily targets civilians in its terrorist operations, and it was responsible for the 2014 kidnapping of the Chibok girls. In 2016, Boko Haram split into two factions, one of which remains affiliated with ISIS. Known as Islamic State-West African Province (ISWAP), the group is active near the Lake Chad Basin. It almost exclusively attacks Nigerian government targets. ISWAP has benefited from the Nigerian Government’s recent decision to concentrate its forces in garrison towns, effectively ceding most rural areas to the Islamic insurgency.
- In Central and Southern Africa, parts of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) have pledged allegiance to the embryonic Islamic State-Central African Province (ISCAP). The Congo Research Group, an independent nonprofit run by a leading scholar on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, says that the militants have not only been espousing jihadist ideology, but they also may have received funding from ISIS operatives. Mozambique’s Islamist militants in the oil-rich Cabo Delgado province also are notionally part of ISCAP, although the group has no media or web presence. Between October 2017 and August 2019, the Mozambican Islamist insurgency conducted 178 attacks—79 percent of which were committed against civilians—resulting in over 350 deaths, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Database (ACLED).

Threats to U.S. National Security and Foreign Policy

ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other extremist groups pose a significant threat to U.S. national security and foreign policy interests in sub-Saharan Africa. While it is unwise to fully discount an attack on the homeland, there has been limited open-source information to indicate the possibility of a high-impact scenario. Indeed, it has been almost a decade since Nigerian citizen Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab attempted to detonate explosives hidden in his underwear on board a flight en route to Detroit on Christmas in 2009.

The threats from extremist groups operating in sub-Saharan Africa fall into three categories: (1) risks to U.S. persons, facilities, and financial interests in the region; (2) costs to U.S. taxpayers to finance peacekeeping and humanitarian relief missions; and (3) damage to U.S. leadership and influence because U.S. allies and adversaries perceive that the United States is disengaging.

ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other extremist groups have targeted U.S. persons and U.S. facilities, as well as hotels and shopping malls where foreigners frequent. In July, al-Shabaab tried to kill former U.S. Ambassador and current UN Special Representative for Somalia James Swan. The suicide

bomber failed, but unfortunately did manage to kill seven other people, including the Mayor of Mogadishu. In September, al-Shabaab detonated a car bomb at the gate of Baledogle military airfield where the U.S. troops train Somali soldiers. In 2017, Nigeria's State Security Service said it thwarted plans by terrorists they believed affiliated with Boko Haram to attack the British and U.S. embassies. In 2016, South African authorities arrested two of its citizens for plotting to attack the U.S. Embassy in Pretoria. During the past decade, these groups have attacked soft targets, where expatriates congregate, including the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya in 2013; the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako, Mali in 2015; the Cappuccino restaurant and Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in 2016; the Étoile du Sud hotel in Grand Bassam, Cote d'Ivoire in 2016; and the DusitD2 complex in Nairobi, Kenya in 2019. In addition, extremist groups have threatened U.S. investments. Islamist militants in northern Mozambique killed one contractor who worked for a U.S. oil company and continue to endanger operations near one of the largest LNG finds in the world.

Extremist violence has serious resource implications for the United States, even when the terrorist groups attacks domestic targets. During the past two decades, the United States has provided training and financial contributions to multilateral and bilateral peacekeeping and counterterrorism missions in West and East Africa. The United States has supported the AU Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) since its creation in 2007, providing financial assistance and training to the AMISOM troop-contributing countries. The U.S. military also conducts strikes against al-Shabaab and the faction aligned with ISIS. U.S. officials voted to establish the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in 2013, which has an annual budget of \$1.18 billion. The United States supports bilateral partners in the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which operates in the Lake Chad Basin, and the G-5 Sahel Joint Force countries. Last year, the United States, for example, nearly doubled its pledge of military assistance to the G-5 Sahel to around \$111 million. In addition, the United States regularly allocates funding to alleviate the human suffering caused by extremism. USAID provided more than \$130 million in humanitarian assistance, including emergency food aid and health services, to Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in fiscal year 2019.

Moreover, the persistence of ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other extremist groups coupled with perceptions that the United States is reducing its counterterrorism engagement in the region threatens to undercut U.S. leadership. Last year, Pentagon officials said they would cut roughly 10 percent of the 7,200 U.S. troops on the African continent. This announcement panicked U.S. allies, including the European Union and France, which have deployed more than 4,000 troops and trainers to the Sahel region. African partners have raised similar concerns about Washington's commitment. Nigerien President Mahamadou Issoufou has called for an international coalition, like in Syria or Iraq, to fight terrorism in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin. He pointedly said, "When I say an international force this also includes the U.S." It is not only U.S. allies that have questioned Washington's resolve. Russia and China have moved into the region to proffer themselves as an alternative to the United States. Russia has signed defense agreements with Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger. This year, Moscow delivered air assets to the Government of Mozambique and Russian private military contractors engaged in a skirmish with Islamic insurgents in Cabo Delgado.

Policy Recommendations

The United States has strategic interests in sub-Saharan Africa in general and in countering violent extremism in particular. While it is dangerous to withdraw and disengage, it is also ill-advised to continue as we have for the past two decades. U.S. counterterrorism efforts have prevented attacks on the homeland, and a failure on the part of the United States to remain active will provide space for extremist groups to plan and execute more attacks. At the same time, it is important to rethink our investments, interventions, and partnerships. Below are four recommendations to further U.S. objectives and advance peace and security in the region.

- **Invest in Defense Institution Building.** While most African militaries need capacity training, it is short-sighted to primarily work with specialized units at the expense of the broader uniformed and civilian national security architecture. Some leaders have repurposed these troops for regime protection missions, and these units have engendered the hostility of their military peers. The Security Governance Initiative (SGI), launched by President Obama in 2014, was a step in the right direction, but it could benefit from more transparency, interagency coordination, and integration with U.S. strategic objectives. Similarly, the United States should increase the money and training it provides to African police forces, not just militaries. According to the Security Assistance Monitor, police received less than two percent of U.S. funding allocated for sub-Saharan security services. Of the five sub-Saharan African countries in SGI, only Kenya has a policing component.
- **Tackle State Fragility and Politics.** There is a growing consensus that preventive measures that address the underlying drivers of extremism are more effective and less expensive than a counterterrorism-only approach. According to the USIP Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States, preventive efforts have the potential to “reduce the likelihood that extremists will turn local conflicts into transnational jihads, hold territory, or establish governance.” Moreover, these activities have been shown to save money compared with the costs of responding to conflict—as much as 16-to-1, according to some studies. It is equally important to grapple with the domestic political incentives and disincentives that discourage holistic responses to counterterrorism threats. This was a key finding of the recent Center for Global Development report on U.S. assistance to fragile states, of which I was a member of the working group. This is especially relevant in Mali and Nigeria where there is little political will to respond constructively to the security threats.
- **Stand up for Human Rights and Democracy.** The United States has been inconsistent about its commitment to values-based partnerships with African counterparts when confronting extremist threats. Several regional governments, including Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mozambique, and Nigeria, have been accused of human rights abuses. While individual soldiers and units have been blacklisted from U.S. assistance, it is often targeted and intended to preserve a working relationship with the host government. U.S. promotion of human rights isn’t just a feel-good policy, it is about a more effective counterterrorism strategy. It is axiomatic that governments that abuse their populations and fail to adhere to the rule of law will shore up the ranks of the extremists. According to a UNDP study from 2017, 71 percent of interviewed former extremist

group members said they joined these groups in response to violent or repressive government actions against them or those close to them. If a government is guilty of gross human rights violations, it is in the U.S. interest to withhold assistance as well as work with authorities to take all necessary corrective steps to resume engagement—both of which are consistent with U.S. law.

- **Broaden the International and Domestic Coalition.** The United States is neither capable nor suited to lead the response to every terrorist and security challenge in the region. Consequently, it is in the U.S. interest to recruit more foreign and domestic partners to contribute to the counterterrorism effort in sub-Saharan Africa. The United States should appeal to other countries, even non-traditional partners, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, to share their experiences and expertise to assist African counterparts. The U.S. Government should also step in and act as a referee when international quarrels, such as the current rift between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar, threaten to disrupt counterterrorism activities. Finally, the United States should seek to engage African media, legislators, judges, and civil society stakeholders in the fight against terrorism. It is sadly too often that the region's governments regard journalists, opposition politicians, and activists as more threatening than the terrorists.