

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism, Law Enforcement, and Intelligence

Hearing on

**“The Future of Homeland Security:
The Rise of Terrorism in Africa”**

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10:00 a.m.
310 Cannon House Office Building
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Prepared Statement of

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Chairman Pfluger,
Ranking Member Magaziner,
Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism, Law Enforcement, and Intelligence,

Permit me to begin by thanking you, not only for the opportunity to testify before you today on the subject of the rise of terrorism in Africa and its impact on the security of our American homeland, but also for the sustained attention which the United States House of Representatives has given to this challenge. In its oversight capacity, the people’s House—and, especially, the Committee on Homeland Security—has been very much ahead of the curve over the course of the last two decades and it has been my singular privilege to have contributed, however modestly, to that effort over that time.

In fact, if I may cite just one example, it was this esteemed panel’s predecessor, the Subcommittee on Intelligence and Counterterrorism, that twelve years ago convened the very first congressional hearing on Boko Haram, at which I also had the privilege of testifying. At that time, Boko Haram was considered so obscure that the all the participants at the event, held in conjunction with the release of a bipartisan report on the threat posed by the militant group, might have been able to convene in the proverbial broom closet. Sadly, our analysis proved

prescient and, rather than fading away as some dismissively suggested at the time that it would, Boko Haram went on to pose an even greater menace, not only to Nigeria and its people, but to their neighbors in West Africa as well as to international security writ large as it metastasized into the West Africa Province of the so-called Islamic State.

The Current Reality

As the title of this hearing correctly suggests, there is indeed a rise in terrorist activity in Africa and it does impact the future security of our homeland. Let me address both of these aspects in turn.

First, while thankfully the number of deaths caused by terrorism around the globe has been on the decline the last several years—although, of course, even one death is one too many—the progress has been uneven. In Africa, the trend has been, sadly, that of increased violence, with the Sahel region in particular witnessing a significant deterioration with Burkina Faso and Mali recording 1,135 and 944 deaths, respectively, last year according to the data set of the Global Terrorism Index. In fact, just these two Sahelian countries alone accounted for one-third of all deaths from terrorism around the world in 2022. Burkina Faso even edged out Afghanistan for the dubious distinction of being the deadliest country in the world for terrorism. It is not just that the sheer number of deaths has increased from the year before, but the terrorist attacks themselves have become more lethal: the latter has ticked up 38 percent, but the former has gone up 50 percent. Overall, the Sahel region represented 43 percent of global terrorism deaths in 2022, an increase of 7 percent over 2021. If current trends continue, the Sahel region may well account for slightly more than half of the fatalities this year. Africa as a whole represented just under 50 percent of all deaths from terrorism in 2022 and so, barring an attack elsewhere in the world that might result in mass casualties skewing the data, will easily account for a majority of global deaths from terrorism in 2023, with attacks increasingly impacting West African littoral states which had previously experienced few, if any, attacks.

One counterterrorism good news story from Africa in 2022 was Niger, which saw a 79 percent decrease in deaths from terrorism. Alas, the coup in that country exactly two months ago risks undoing that progress.

Second, while the Sahel appears superficially remote to America, it is worth remembering that centuries-old trade routes leading across the Sahara Desert to the Mediterranean and beyond to Europe run across the region. Today those ancient paths are used for both human trafficking and the smuggling of drugs and other contraband to Europe and thus represent a vulnerability to a number of U.S. allies. In addition, in the wake of the pivot from their dependence on Russian oil and gas, many of our European allies have come to rely on energy exported from West African producers via pipelines that traverse the Sahel region. For these and other strategic reasons, the United States has maintained two bases in Niger, with approximately 1,000 men and women of our Armed Forces deployed there, with a mission of both intelligence gathering and counterterrorism across the wider region that has been invaluable—and will prove even more so

in the weeks and months ahead given French President Emmanuel Macron's announcement this past weekend of a pullout of his country's military forces in Niger by the end of this year.

While the regional affiliates of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State that constitute much of the infrastructure for terrorism and violent extremism in the Sahel and across Africa do not presently appear to have the capability to attack the American homeland, that does not mean that they would not if they were somehow, God forbid, to come into those means. Moreover, there are U.S. citizens well within their reach as the long ordeal of aid worker Jeff Woodke, held captive for over six years after he was kidnapped from Niamey, Niger, underscored, as well as significant American economic and other interests across the African continent, including in countries where terrorist groups have been stepping up attacks in recent years, including to Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique, and the West African countries along the Gulf of Guinea.

To cite just one example, the administration has rightly won plaudits for its investment, alongside G7 partners and, more recently, the European Union, in strategic corridors like the one stretching from the Angolan port of Lobito to the DRC and on to Zambia (with the possibility of a future extension to the Indian Ocean). These are not just transportation infrastructures that will bring critical minerals to market, but corridors for energy and communications to flow. But one also has to recognize as an al-Qaeda strategist opined nearly two decades ago that, "This is a continent with many potential advantages and exploiting this potential will greatly advance the jihad."

The U.S. Response

Let me now pivot to offer several considerations about the U.S. response to the rise of terrorism in Africa and the possible threat this phenomenon poses to American citizens and interests abroad as well as to the American homeland.

First, time and again, the mistake has been made to underestimate—if not to discount entirely—the threat faced. Part of this is attributable to an analytical bias to limit future possibilities to extrapolations from the past, a hermeneutical choice which ignores the dynamic potential which many terrorist organizations have exhibited. Another part of the explanation is even more basic: the sheer lack of resources for Africa-related intelligence and analysis across the whole of the U.S. government. Given the geopolitical, economic, and security stakes, the failure to invest more in institutions, personnel, training, and strategic focus is incredibly shortsighted.

Second, with the exception of the Department of Defense with the U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM), across the U.S. government there is an artificial division of the continent that, quite frankly, is rejected not only by Africans, but is also unhelpful—witness the criticism of the Biden administration by many African leaders for the decision to label its Africa strategy document as one for Sub-Saharan Africa only. In reality, there are few compelling geopolitical, economic, or strategic reasons to do so except possibly for Egypt. In point of fact, the overwhelming majority of the regional political, security, and commercial links extending to and from the other four North African countries go north-south across the Sahara, not east-west

towards the Levant. While I was able to bridge the divide during my tenure as Special Envoy for the Sahel Region with explicit authority from Secretary of State Michael Pompeo to work with both the Bureau of African Affairs and the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, I have had no successor and, in any event, a longer-term, rather than *ad hoc*, solution is needed.

Third, bureaucratic structures are only of value insofar as the positions therein are filled by qualified individuals. Without getting polemics about decision-making in the current administration or political dynamics in the Senate, permit me simply to observe that it does not serve America's interests that key positions go unfilled for months, if not years, including that of U.S. Ambassador to the African Union. Or in the Sahel where, in Niger, the administration waited eight months after the retirement of Ambassador Eric Whitaker in December 2021 before nominating his successor, Kathleen FitzGibbon. Ambassador FitzGibbon waited a full year before receiving unanimous confirmation by the Senate, ironically, the day after a coup overthrew the government she was to have been accredited to, her nomination being held up all that time for reasons having little or nothing to do with her qualifications.

Fourth, closely related to terrorism is the danger posed by lack of effective sovereignty that bedevils many African governments. Often the challenge first manifests itself in criminality, whether in the form of piracy and other brigandage or in that of trafficking, human or material. For the United States, all this means that increasing vigilance against terrorism in Africa also requires greater investments in law enforcement capabilities focused on the continent, including enhanced analytical resources at home, more liaison personnel posted abroad, and stepping up efforts to build the capacity of our partners on the continent. Abroad, this requires a more *pragmatic* attitude that prioritizes maintaining the progress that has been achieved in regions like the Sahel and *realistic* perspective that privileges effective partners who have proven their value over those that have failed time and again—a good candidate for review is our failure to more strategically engage in the Horn of Africa with the Republic of Somaliland, a functional state, while pouring billions into the perennial failed state of rump Somalia, which has as a government minister a terrorist who just a few years ago had a \$5 million bounty on his head from our own Rewards for Justice program.

Fifth, as America's relationships—diplomatic, security, economic, and cultural—with Africa as a whole and with the individual countries on the continent expands and deepens (a positive development to be sure!), an unfortunate downside is that the potential risk to U.S. persons and interests as well as to the homeland necessarily increases. Quite simply, threats exist and more engagement, by its very nature, increases exposure and vulnerability to them. The answer is not to curtail engagement since there are clear strategic imperatives for seeking to build these links, but to ensure that adequate resources are mustered to cope with the meet the rising demand across a whole range of sectors from civil aviation to ports to customs and immigration, etc., for more intelligence on and security against threats originating in Africa.

Sixth, with many supply chains for the critical minerals needed for both the energy transition and new technologies running through Africa, I would invite this distinguished panel to consider a

broader vision of security, not just in protecting the American people and homeland from attacks, but also protecting their access to the strategic materials which are essential for our defense systems and civilian economy.

Seventh, the challenge of terrorism in Africa and any derivative threat to the United States cannot be addressed except in an integrated fashion, with solutions that embrace a broader notion of human security writ large—encompassing social, economic, and political development—which, often enough, also must transcend national and other boundaries. As I repeatedly emphasize during my service as envoy to the Sahel: “The heart of the crisis in the Sahel is one of state legitimacy—a perception by citizens that their government is valid, equitable, and able and willing to meet their needs... Absent states’ commitments to meeting their citizens’ needs, no degree of international engagement is likely to succeed.” This obviously is not a task for the United States alone. Nevertheless, it is one which America has a strategic interest in embracing and leading. This is especially true given the forced retreat of our ally France and increasing activity of geopolitical rivals like China and Russia (as well as the latter’s proxies like the Wagner Group criminal network set up by the late and unlamented Yevgeny Prigozhin).

Conclusion

Successive administrations, both Democrat and Republican, and the Congress deserve credit for efforts in recent years to shift the narrative on Africa towards a greater focus on the extraordinary potential of the continent and its strategic importance. However, if this momentum is to be maintained and the opportunities identified grasped, the United States needs to redouble its own efforts and also work closely with its African and other partners to manage the challenges, overcoming terrorism and other threats to security which stand in the way to an incredibly promising future.