

“Reviewing and Improving US Security Strategy in Africa’s Sahel Region”

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Hearing on “The Growing Crises in Africa’s Sahel Region”

Chairman Smith and Ranking Member Bass;
Chairman Ros-Lehtinen and Ranking Member Deutch;
Chairman Poe and Ranking Member Sherman:

Good afternoon. I am honored that you have included me among the witnesses testifying here this afternoon. More importantly, I am deeply grateful that you are devoting so much of your personal, official and institutional resources to critical problems in Africa. I thank you as an African-born immigrant and I believe I speak for my fellow Africans in expressing this gratitude.

As I am sure you already know, you have some pretty impressive staff. Please know that they just went to great lengths to allow me to be at this table today. I appreciate their help very much.

Mr. Chairman, “Sahel” is a useful, geographic description. It is usually designates the band of semi-arid land that marks the southern edge of the Sahara Desert and which runs through African countries from the Atlantic ocean to the Red Sea, especially these six West African countries—Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad.

However, this hearing must be commended for taking a different, broader, better view. This it does by looking as far north as Libya and as far south as Nigeria. This is because geography and history have long knitted the Africans living between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic together—the Sahara Desert and the rainforest belt notwithstanding. The borders that today separate these communities into modern countries are relatively recent and quite porous.

There is an even more powerful, more relevant, reason for treating as a unit that huge regional chunk of Africa lying between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. (BTW this is a chunk that is larger in size than the US). That reason is the focus of this hearing. “The hearing will examine terrorism, drug smuggling, humanitarian concerns, human rights problems, and governance in Africa’s Sahel region.” So says the invitation letter. Each one of these five identified problems is transnational. To a great degree, then, addressing them must therefore be regional as well.

Of course there are limits to the usefulness of a transnational, regional approach anywhere. In the Sahel, the intensity of each of the five “complex challenges” varies across different countries.

And then, more importantly, there is the difference in responses. Even where a problem has afflicted several countries a similar degree, it is almost guaranteed that responses would differ from country to country. For example, it has been rightly and widely stressed for 18 months that, for whatever reason, the Issouffou government in Niamey responded more effectively than did the Toure administration in Bamako to the same dangerous contagion from post-Gaddafi Libya: the inflow of dangerous arms and even more dangerous Tuareg fighters and their jihadist allies.

Despite these limits, for this hearing, the regional cross-country approach remains the better choice. It is preferable to the alternative: in-depth, tunnel-vision focus on each individual Sahelian country in isolation from its neighbors.

There is a corresponding choice that I have made by testifying: greater pre-occupation with policy implication in general and with US policy options in particular.

Here is another way of putting this choice I have made. In this testimony, it is vital for invited witnesses to possess and present good, up-to-date understanding of how the five grave challenges are afflicting each country and the Sahel as a whole and of how well local people and leaders are responding. The relevant question is, “How hard has each crisis (terrorism, drugs, humanitarian problems, human rights abuses and weak government) hit each country and the whole Sahel?”

However, what is even more relevant in this hearing are the implications for the US—for its interests and for its policy options in reaction. This focus on implications for the US comes with its own questions as well. On Sunday, May 12, 2013, former Defense Secretary Robert Gates succinctly captured one, “If an international crisis has to be solved, why should it be the US?” Regarding the crises in the Sahel, related questions arise: What have increasing terrorism, drug smuggling, humanitarian catastrophe, human rights abuses, and weak governance in Africa’s Sahel got to do with us in America? Why should we care? Are our interests affected? Have we not helped already? What more can we do? I believe these questions are so justified and so vital that it would be irresponsible for any elected official, let alone the US Congress, not to find answers.

Above all else my testimony is an attempt to offer my considered answers for the consideration of the three subcommittees. Therefore it is less of a diagnosis of what ails Sahelian countries (though that forms the foundation) and more of a recommended therapy—why and how the US protects its important interests in the face of the growing crises in the Sahel.

The rest of this written testimony has these sequential components:

A sketchy, summarized assessment of each of the 5 challenges across the region (the diagnosis);

Implications of the crises for American interests;

Outline of US strategy and activities in the region since 9/11;

Identification of apparent weaknesses in current US strategy;

A suggested three-prong strategy going forward;

Responses to select flawed policy arguments;

A summary of 10 recommended guidelines for US policy and engagement; and

Conclusion.

Terrorism: For the international community, especially the US, increasing terrorism is the most alarming development across the Sahel. And this growth is real and observable— notwithstanding outright arguments and subtle hints by some analysts that terrorism in Africa is a Western pretext. I differ with those analysts and offer as early evidence the bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania which killed several times more Africans.

Across the region recently, three countries have been hit hardest by terrorism—Libya, Nigeria and Mali. In Libya the regime that succeeded Col Muammar Gaddafi remains extremely weak and is being pushed around by armed, extremist militias who perpetrate acts that can only be called terrorism. Libya also enjoys the dubious distinction of having inflamed terrorism far beyond its borders to a much greater extent than any other country in region. Besides the weak state and many strong defiant extremist militias, one other factor caused this to happen: Col Gaddafi's huge arsenal was left unsecured and sophisticated and deadly weapons gushed out into our region and beyond.

And then there is Nigeria. Just a week ago, President Jonathan's slapped an on-going state of emergency and federal military occupation on three states. This is the latest attempt to control Boko Haram terrorists, now into their fourth year of violent militant insurgency, ostensibly to get Sharia law imposed across Africa's most populous country. The president's action is the biggest domestic security action since the catastrophic Biafran secession war some four decades ago.

Undoubtedly, Mali has been the epicenter, hammered the worst by terrorism in the region. The terrorists in Mali came close to taking over the entire country. But for the French-led intervention, they would have grabbed a chance to implement the next phases of their war plans: use Mali's territory and state instruments as a base from which to attack the African neighbors, then Europe and finally the US.

Drug smuggling, manufacture and growing usage: For a few years now, US anti-drug officials have voiced concern about the growth of a drug culture along the West African littoral and northwards on to the Sahel, Sahara, and North Africa. Now two other significant institutions have added their voices to the warnings. One is the UN's Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC. The other is the West African Commission on Drugs launched five months ago by Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General. The story the three sources tell is alarming: The region has been engulfed by gushers of narcotics, especially cocaine (from South America on its way to Europe), meth (manufactured locally and smuggled into Asia), and heroin (from Asia being smuggled into Europe).

The impact has been frightening. Guinea-Bissau has slipped closer toward a narco-state according to experts. Critics have accused officials of both the ousted administration of ex-Malian President Toure and its Tuareg and jihadist nemeses of being implicated. Throughout the region, drug money is fueling corruption and therefore wreaking havoc on democracy and a state functioning. And the growing consumption of narcotics is producing public health problems.

Humanitarian problems: In one respect the regional humanitarian pattern is similar to the terrorism pattern: While all countries in the Sahel have been affected, Mali, since January 2012, has been hit hardest, especially in the northern 60% of the country. There, several reliable agencies have all reported the same dismal statistic: At least 50% of the residents have been uprooted. A slight majority are in the southern 40% of the country (especially around Bamako, the capital), making them IDPs. The rest are mostly in inadequately-resourced refugee camps in neighboring Mauritania, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

Three drivers sequentially forced out the northern Mali population. The first is environmental: unusually severe seasonal drought caused severe food insecurity which necessitated mass trekking toward areas in better shape. The second driver was war. The third was the brutal reign of terror unleashed by the war's jihadist victors.

Though not as severely hit as Mali, the neighbors too are still stressed by the humanitarian crisis. Chad, reportedly, has scores of thousands at risk of food shortage. And Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Niger, the three biggest hosts of Malian refugees, are displaying signs of distress.

Human rights violations: While such violations are widespread in the Sahel and indeed across Africa, the already-noted familiar pattern is repeated: During its 2012 war, Mali experienced worst violations than any other of Sahelian country. Corinne Dufka, investigator extraordinaire at Human Rights Watch has done an amazing job of meticulously investigating, documenting and comprehensively reporting abuses across Mali. From her reports--as well as from other sources--three sets of Malian culprits stand out: MNLA, the Tuareg secessionist fighters from Libya who started the war in January 2012; the Malian army, especially the faction loyal to coup-maker Captain Amadou Sanogo; and the three jihadist fighting groups (AQIM, MUJAO, Ansar Dine) who drove out their former ally, the MNLA, and then imposed Sharia law across northern Mali.

As mentioned above in the humanitarian section, the three jihadist victors in Mali's civil war exacted severe punishment for any violations of their newly-imposed strict Sharia law. The diversity of banned items was startling: cell phone ring tones; popular music; soccer; inappropriate dress; interaction of unmarried couples; thievery; and adultery. The punishments were even more staggering—floggings, amputations, and at least one stoning execution of an unmarried couple.

Among several, one bitter irony stands out: While harshly brutalizing Malians for violating their strict imposed rules, the jihadists ignored their own rules with impunity and behaved licentiously. They not only stole residents' property and destroyed ancient cultural heritage but they committed sexual crimes. Here is one instance: In a single November 2012 night in

Timbuktu, six different jihadist fighters serially “married,” raped, and then “divorced” the same teenage girl.

The jihadists’ erstwhile ally, the MNLA, also stands credibly accused of serious human rights violations. For example a year ago, reputable global news organization (Reuters, AP, and VOA) reported that in Gao, the jihadists had been welcomed because the MNLA were seen as intolerably brutal. Still, the most notorious accusation against the MNLA may be what has become known as the Aguelhok massacre. According to GenocideWatch, this is what happened:

On January 24, 2012, the MNLA recaptured Aguelhok and executed 82 prisoners from the Malian army. Two tactics were used: shooting a single bullet through the head or slitting the throat. The hands of the victims were tied. These summary executions were war crimes under both the Geneva Conventions and the Statute of the International Criminal Court, to which Mali is a State-Party. The ICC has, therefore, declared that it will consider claims from several sources in order to decide whether or not to open a war crimes investigation into the allegations of atrocities committed in Mali since January.

It could be argued that the Aguelhok massacre pushed Mali over the edge. Women marched in Bamako excoriating President Toure for allowing their husbands and brothers to be slaughtered. Across southern Mali, especially Bamako, popular anger and reprisals against Tuaregs increased so quickly that President Toure gave a nation-wide address urging that they be spared. And, led by Captain Sanogo, soldiers in Bamako, enraged at their comrades’ gruesome murder, overthrew the government, plunging Mali into even worse crisis.

The third serious violator of human rights in Mali is the army especially the coup-making faction. Soldiers loyal to Sanogo have been accused of executing Red Berets loyal to former President Toure, of beating up Interim President Traore, of disappearing dozens of civilian critics, and of summarily executing on the national highway about a dozen clerics journeying to a meeting in Bamako. And the international community has been quite vocal that in the aftermath of the French intervention, Malian soldiers have been carrying out revenge attacks against civilians, especially Tuaregs.

Governance: Reflecting much of Africa, the countries in our region of focus have weak institutions and are poorly governed, especially when vibrant democracy is the yardstick. Indeed the searing irony is that before it imploded, Mali for the last 20 years had been dubbed the most exemplary democracy in the Sahel region. With Mali’s democracy up in smoke, only Niger, Senegal and Nigeria are led today by men who initially took power through free and fair elections.

This quick assessment of the hearing’s 5 named threats around the Sahel and neighboring countries confirms the assertion that the region has serious growing crises.

But what does this mean for the US? What implications do these Sahel regional crises carry for important American interests?

Answer: The Sahelian crises pose significant dangers to American security and economic interests. If the identified crises go insufficiently addressed, the Sahel and much of the northern half of Africa would become seriously deteriorated.

A deteriorated, crises-ridden Sahel would threaten and negatively impact US interests through several parallel channels. First to be jeopardized would be every important US interest and relationship in Africa—security, economic, diplomatic, medical and environmental.

There would also be an effect in South America to the detriment of US interests there. Unchecked drug trafficking through the Sahel will translate into a reverse flow of drug money and armaments into South America. This bodes ill for America's backyard.

The third channel of negative consequences from a deteriorated Sahel would empty into Europe, the most important of US allies. Narcotics and terrorism are the obvious dangers.

Finally, no one can guarantee that a Sahel in crisis will not find a way to impact the US directly. The example of Abdulmutallab, the underwear bomber, a Nigerian whose path of attack on the US went through Yemen should serve as a cautionary tale.

The implication of these dangers posed to the US by a deteriorated Sahel then is clear: The US protects important interests by engaging the Sahel and helping the region to squelch its emerging crises before they worsen. But such engagement must be built on and learn lessons from previous engagement. This makes the case for a quick review of how the US has engaged Africa in the security sector since 9/11.

This testimony now sketches the post 9/11 American security strategy in Africa by describing several of its component elements. They are: The US persuading Libya to abandon its nuclear weapons program and then rewarding it with closer, warmer ties; establishing the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa and acquiring Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti; creating AFRICOM with the stated purpose of training African armies to become better fighters; launching the activities that became the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership; organizing the annual Operation Flintlock exercises; and privileging Mali, a Sahelian country, as the star pupil of this post 9/11 strategy in Africa.

This testimony believes and argues the following. The post 9/11 security strategy in Africa cries out for a thorough, top-to-bottom, full-blown review and evaluation. The passage of an entire decade is one rationale. Another is a series of important events and occurrences: the North African spring; the aftermath and impact of the Libyan intervention; and Mali's implosion.

The findings and lessons learned from the review must then be incorporated to design a new improved US security strategy in Africa, if called for.

However, even prior to that full review and evaluation being done, some improvements can be made. For example, over the course of the elapsed 10 years, observers have pinpointed perceived weak and undesirable features of the security strategy. As one such observer and as an Africa policy analyst, I have compiled my own list of perceived shortcomings of the US post 9/11

security strategy. They are five. In my opinion, the security strategy: has been too oblivious of local concerns, priorities and opinions; has over-relied on security measures to manage terrorism, while under-utilizing democracy as a potent terrorism prevention tool; has handled the training of African security personnel rather badly; dropped the ball several times after intervening in Libya, an intervention that was justified; and downgraded its Mali involvement far too hastily, a hasty withdrawal that mimics similar ones in Somalia, DRC and Libya;

A good way to correct these five weaknesses is to adopt the following new proposed security strategy. It has two arms. The much, much bigger arm aims to prevent terrorism democracy, inclusiveness, reconciliation and development, or DIRD. The smaller are would use effective security measures (intelligence gathering, police action and military force) to defeat violent, recalcitrant terrorists.

Dear Chairmen, since the Africa embassy bombings, a vigorous debate has long swirled about fighting terrorism in Africa. The debate intensifies around each major security event. In my opinion the debate is extremely valuable, especially for decision- and policy-makers such as you who must sift through the arguments and craft policy erected on the best ideas. To facilitate your decision-making, I will now paraphrase a few of the popular arguments that I disagree with and then make a counter-argument.

“Stay out of Mali; intervention would only make things worse.” This was a popular dominant view in the US throughout 2012. Even the State Department espoused this view in House Testimony last year. The successful French intervention exposes just how wrong this view was.

“Terrorism is a made-up pretext, not a real threat” I have come across this assertion frequently among friends who unfailingly see every US and European military operation in Africa as being motivated by a desire to cordon off African resources from the Chinese. I point out to them the many terror attacks which have killed thousands of Africans.

“Poverty justifies terrorism” Although these precise words are not spoken, this mind-set drives the oft-expressed position which argues that Boko Haram’s violent campaign will persist until poverty in northern Nigeria is eliminated. Pointing out that other zones of Nigeria are also extremely poor but do not resort to terrorism is an effective response.

“Militarism is the entire solution to the Sahel’s terrorism problem” The failure to embrace and use democracy to prevent terrorism suggests that this view holds sway among those in charge of C-T strategy. That it is false is suggested by the popular counter which says that we cannot kill our way out of the terrorism problem.

“Good governance is the name of the game” Using ‘good governance’ in place of ‘democracy’ sends the clear message that dictators are acceptable if they make the trains run on time. This message must be rejected and “good governance” must be discarded as a term.

“The US has limited influence and can do little against friendly tyrants” Ever since the height of the Cold War, Washington officials have trotted out this excuse whenever criticized for not

doing enough to move authoritarian allies toward democracy. The falsity of the excuse becomes obvious when the screws are rightly tightened on dictators who are no allies of Washington.

“MNLA’s armed campaign in Mali is justified” This seems the implied argument of the very large global network of governments, institutions, pundits and analysts who talk endlessly about grievances and who press Bamako to make concessions, despite the MNLA’s heavy baggage. These advocates seem oblivious to the dangerous message this sends to other Malian ethnic communities to pick up arms to get attention.

Scattered through the preceding analysis are several recommendations for improving US policy and activities in the Sahel region, and even the entire African. They are now compiled and listed here.

The US must stay the course especially when providing non-military partnerships will help African allies like Mali make it through difficult times.

The Sahel’s “growing crises” must not be wasted. Instead the opportunity should be seized to undertake a thorough review and evaluation of US security strategy in Africa since 9/11.

The review’s findings and lessons learned must be woven into an updated strategy.

Without first completing the exhaustive review called for, quick improvements can and should be made to correct obvious weaknesses in the current security strategy in Africa. Highly recommended is a revised US strategy that persuades partnering African governments to use democracy, inclusion, reconciliation and development (DIRD) to prevent the emergence of homegrown terrorism.

In operations across Africa, US entities must strike a nuanced balance. On the one hand, they must insist on adherence to non-negotiable universal norms and values. And on the other, they must not dismiss local concerns and customs without first understanding their purposes and motivations.

No authoritarian African ally of the US is indispensable. Learning from the North African Spring, especially Egypt, the US must therefore protect its longer term interests in Africa by heavily insisting on full commitment to democracy as a universal value (no hiding behind watered down “good governance”).

While not compromising on universal norms, US entities must embrace working behind the leadership of locals during collaboration on African projects and they must be good guests who respect locals’ knowledge of their history, their environment, their problems & their aspirations.

The US must quickly return to its previous top leadership position in Mali, although this time in the non-security sector during Mali’s reconstruction.

Specifically, the US must quickly assist in drawing up a shovel ready contingency plan for Mali's July elections which can be speedily implemented to cope with undesirable developments. Call this an electoral insurance policy. It has become necessary because in the opinion of many observers, this witness included, the international community is rushing an unready Mali toward hastily organized elections.

Finally, the US should adopt Mali's Political Dialog and Reconciliation process and draw on its rich tradition of democratic diversity and equal rights aspirations to help Mali heal.

Once again I am grateful to all three subcommittees for the opportunity to share my opinions about important issues affecting Africa. And I will be glad to answer your questions. Thank you.