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**Statement of Dr. Celeste Wallander**  
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**House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa**  
**“The Sahel in Crisis: Examining U.S. Policy Options”**

**December 5, 2023**

- Chairman James, Ranking Member Jacobs, Members of the Committee: Thank you for having me here today to discuss the situation in the Sahel, and Niger in particular, as well as the continuing importance of U.S. presence, operations, and security force assistance to our African partners.
- Security in the Sahel has steadily declined since the Libyan crisis of 2011. Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) affiliated with both Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have taken advantage of weak governments and failed states. These VEOs have overstretched the defense and security forces of many regional governments and carved out safe havens to progressively expand their operational reach. This has allowed these VEOs to expand their influence and operations toward the littoral countries along the Gulf of Guinea.
- The Department of Defense’s strategy focuses on two main lines of effort. In the short and medium term, we will support African-led counter-terrorism operations to disrupt the most acute terrorist threats, with a particular emphasis on those targeting U.S. interests. In the long term, we will emphasize bilateral security assistance to African defense and security forces in order to build their own home-grown capacity to counter these threats without extensive external assistance.
- Over the last three years, significant changes in the political environment in the Sahel have affected our ability to work with both African and international partners. Successive military coups in Mali in 2020, in Burkina Faso in 2022, and now in Niger in 2023 have resulted in restrictions on DoD’s operations and assistance programs. Other international allies and partners have also reconsidered their presence in the region, requiring us to re-evaluate our own posture.
- We remain concerned that these developments will provide more space for VEOs to operate and make it more challenging to address those threats. VEOs thrive in areas of instability and seek to leverage that instability for their own ends, as evidenced by the attacks we have seen in Niger since the coup.
- Within this context, our strategic competitors have seized the opportunity to increase their own access and influence. Russia has been particularly active in stoking anti-Western sentiment and presenting its military contractors—or Russian Private Military

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Companies (PMCs) such as the Wagner Group—as practical alternatives to Western trainers.

- We are at a crossroads. On the one hand, we cannot afford to ignore the sustained challenge to democracy by military juntas, nor turn a blind eye to their misuse of power. As Secretary Austin noted during his recent trip to Africa, “When generals overturn the will of the people and put their own ambitions above the rule of law, security suffers—and democracy dies.”
- We also cannot afford to compromise our regional influence and security partnerships, which are threatened by competitors who are less concerned with democratic values and human rights; and threatened by the fragility of Sahel states. There is also a significant risk that VEOs might expand their influence or capabilities in the region if counterterrorism pressure remains at reduced levels.
- Given this elevated threat environment, the Department of Defense is committed to working with our interagency partners to continue to monitor and disrupt VEO threats emanating from the Sahel, while constructively engaging with regional states to restore productive, democratic governance in those countries.
- In doing so, we are consistently working to strike a balance between offering the practical assistance that our African partners need to face emergent threats while reinforcing our professional values to help them build strong, resilient institutions that will reinforce not only their physical security, but also democratic stability.
- Our success depends on continued investment in West Africa. To do this, we must maintain some continuity with our past efforts, while adjusting our approach to reflect changes in the environment, as well as the actions of our African partners, international allies and partners, and strategic competitors.
- DoD’s requirement to monitor indications and warnings of VEO activity in the Sahel and prevent threats to U.S. interests emanating from the region has not changed. For the last 10 years, our posture in Niger has proven critical to this effort. Moving forward, we have worked side by side with the Department of State and other interagency partners to define conditions for restoring our activities and operations in Niger. Nigerien officials must quickly and credibly transition back to a democratically elected, civilian led government.
- VEO expansion towards the Gulf of Guinea, as well as other partners’ reduced operational activity and Russia’s increased presence, force us to adjust our long-term approach to counter-terrorism and security cooperation in West Africa.

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- We will need to coordinate closely with other international partners to jointly develop new, collective approaches that emphasize burden-sharing amongst stakeholders and seek to support African-led security initiatives.
- In closing, let me reiterate my appreciation to this Committee for your continued attention to the challenges and opportunities in the Sahel. This is a critical region and I look forward to today's dialogue.

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