STATEMENT – Donna O. Charles
Hearing: "The Future of Homeland Security: Addressing the Rise of Terrorism in Africa"
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism, Law Enforcement, and Intelligence

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Chairman Pfluger, Ranking Member Magaziner, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee - I thank you and your staff for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the rise of terrorism in Africa and the potential threat it poses to the Homeland.

In my role as the Director for West Africa and the Sahel at the U.S. Institute of Peace, I lead the Institute's efforts to inform public policy and programs that are designed to help our partners counter terrorism and violent extremism, prevent and stabilize regional conflicts, promote community-led peacebuilding initiatives, and advance good governance reforms in the region. The U.S. Institute of Peace is one of the few independent organizations of its caliber to have in-country staff in some of the most challenging and dynamic areas in the world. I am fortunate to have the opportunity to continue building on two decades of experience in foreign policy and national security from various corners of the U.S. interagency, which includes nearly a decade of service as an active-duty officer in the U.S. Air Force. I am proud of my service to this country and am honored for every opportunity I receive to continue in that service.

During my tenure at the State Department, where I focused on U.S. counterterrorism objectives, operations, and programs in Africa, I witnessed how important it is for the United States to remain vigilant in its efforts to neutralize, contain, and deter threats that could threaten us here at home. While my professional experiences will inform my testimony and responses before you today, they are wholly my own and do not reflect the positions or policies of the U.S. Institute of Peace or any other department or agency.

My testimony will focus on three critical issues that I assess are foundational to addressing the complex landscape of terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa and how its evolution poses a threat to the Homeland. The first is understanding capabilities and intent, which shape how we think about how known and suspected terrorists operate at home and abroad and how to best counter their efforts; the second is mapping out risks and vulnerabilities to U.S. persons and interests at home and in Africa, including our posture, exposure, and risk tolerance; and the third and final issue is building partnerships and capacities where they matter most. In my experience, the issues I have identified require a robust set of tools and an equally robust policy that defines our strategic interests and political will to apply resources where they are lacking.

Capabilities and Intent

When analyzing the capabilities and intent of prominent foreign terrorist organizations operating throughout Africa, it helps to understand that these groups are not cut from whole cloth. From al-Shabaab in East Africa to ISIS in West Africa, there may be similarities in their distorted ideologies and perceptions of Islam, but their capabilities, intent, and in some cases, tactics, techniques, and procedures, vary for practical reasons. For instance, while most of these terror groups aspire to establish caliphates that extend to the borders of the countries in which they operate and beyond, there is not a single group operating in Sub-Saharan Africa that can accomplish this without overcoming steep hurdles, including rival factions, armed groups, regional forces, and vigilantes. What ISIS accomplished in Syria and Iraq circa 2014[i] reminds us

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that the idea of establishing a caliphate is possible but not durable.   Understanding this landscape should inform how we develop policies, programs, and operations meant to reduce, if not eliminate, continuing and imminent threats to U.S. persons and interests here and abroad.

I am not aware of any credible evidence available publicly that suggests terrorist groups operating in West Africa and the Sahel pose a continuing and imminent threat to the U.S. Homeland. In this case, it is important to distinguish threats to U.S. persons and interests in the region, including hard targets like U.S. embassies to soft targets like hotels and shopping centers, from threats to the Homeland. Counterterrorism practitioners should not rule out how the evolution of terrorist groups in Africa, for which we have many examples, has resulted in significant shifts in capabilities and intent.

A prime example of this shift in capabilities and intent is the Somalia-based al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab, a U.S. designated foreign terrorist organization[ii] that is also designated by the UN[iii] and other countries and organizations[iv]. For almost two decades, analysts have observed al-Shabaab's capabilities and tactics in asymmetrical warfare advance substantially, and almost proportionately to the group's capacity to raise funds and collect revenues from a range of illicit activities and ostensibly legitimate businesses. A body of credible open-source reporting and publicly available testimony from U.S. officials indicate that al-Shabaab remains the wealthiest, largest, and most lethal al-Qaeda affiliate in the world.[v] It is only in the last three years that U.S. officials have publicly concluded that al-Shabaab is a threat to the U.S. Homeland as well.[vi] This conclusion has much to do with the details of an al-Shabaab plot uncovered by Filipino authorities in 2019 that involved an al-Shabaab operative who was in the final stages of completing a flight training program in the Philippines.[vii] While there have been reports of threats and plots hatched by al-Shabaab against the U.S. Homeland over the last decade[viii], this plot was one of the first indicators that al-Shabaab had both the capability and intent to strike targets outside of the East Africa region, and likely inside the United States based on evidence found at the crime scene and elsewhere.

This plot, among others, should inform how the United States and other partners continue to reevaluate and enhance our approaches to countering terrorism threats. In the case of al-Shabaab, the preponderance of resources, including training, equipping, and generally building out counterterrorism capabilities of regional partners like Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia, have been focused largely on neutralizing an agile and resilient threat on the ground using traditional and conventional tools.[ix] However, the ongoing evolution of information technology, including social media, and the growing interconnectedness of our transportation, trade, financial, and communication networks have opened avenues of approach for terrorist groups targeting the United States and our partners. Even modestly resourced terrorist groups no longer limit themselves to launching asymmetrical physical attacks against local or regional targets of opportunity. Most terrorist groups operating in Sub-Saharan Africa have long used social media to radicalize, recruit, and propagandize their campaigns against civilians, Western-aligned regional governments, and, in some cases, the West itself.[x,xi]

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Al-Shabaab is in a league of its own in Africa when we consider its long history of using social media and other tools to radicalize and recruit youth from the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere who traveled to Somalia, or attempted to travel there, to fight alongside and work on behalf of al-Shabaab or al Qaeda of East Africa.[xii] Like many other likeminded terrorist groups, al-Shabaab reportedly used its platform to praise the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021.[xiii] Despite this outward signal of support for the Taliban's cause, I am not aware of any credible and public information indicating the Taliban and Africa-based terrorist groups are linked currently through finances or other means of assistance. However, there is a body of historical reporting that links legacy members of al-Shabaab and its precursor organizations (e.g., Al Ittihad Al Islamiya, known as AIAI, which rose to prominence in Somalia in the 1990s) to training camps in Afghanistan.[xiv]

Al-Shabaab's origin story, which dates to the early and mid-2000s, paints a clear picture of a group that remains intent on establishing an Islamic caliphate in a Somalia under shari'a law and ousting Ethiopian and other Western-backed forces. The group's focus has been highly localized, allowing it to amass enough power, personnel, and resources to take over large swaths of territory in southern and central Somalia. Over the next decade, al-Shabaab established governance structures throughout the country, meted out justice and retribution through harsh and savage tactics, and expanded its operations to Kenya, Djibouti, Uganda, Ethiopia, and elsewhere in East Africa. As African Union forces, with support from the United States and others, beat al-Shabaab's forces back from strongholds along the coast and the Juba River Valley, the group had less territory to govern and more time to focus on external operations.[xv] The group's endurance is due in large part to how pervasive al-Shabaab and its proxies are in Somalia and by its capacity to penetrate almost all aspects of Somali society, including financial services, commerce, and telecommunications.[xvi] In my estimation, the longevity of a group like al-Shabaab is fundamental to its threat profile today. The fact that al-Shabaab had the ability to deploy operatives beyond the continent to obtain flight training speaks to the strategic patience of its leadership, planners, and operatives.

Risks and Vulnerabilities

This example demonstrates why the United States can ill afford to underestimate the nature of the terrorism threat in other parts of Africa, including West Africa and the Sahel, and leads me to the second critical issue the United States must factor into its analysis – mapping risks and vulnerabilities to the U.S. persons and interests, including the Homeland. Most terrorist groups operating in West Africa and the Sahel, which include ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates, appear focused on conducting asymmetric attacks against regional government forces and softer civilian targets, with many having established human smuggling, narco-trafficking, and kidnapping-for-ransom networks.[xvii] The latter often target Westerners whose countries are known to pay ransoms for their release.[xviii] Terrorist organizations based in West Africa and the Sahel have also used their platforms to declare jihad against the West, radicalize recruits, and make a gruesome display of their attacks through social media.[xix] However, I have not seen credible, publicly

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available evidence to indicate any West Africa-based groups have demonstrated the capability and intent to attack the Homeland.

Terrorist groups throughout the continent have demonstrated the ability to evolve and improve their tactics, techniques, procedures, and targets. This fact holds true for groups that have emerged in recent years in Central Africa (ISIS in the Democratic Republic of the Congo) and southern Africa (ISIS-Mozambique and related networks in South Africa, for example). As a result, the United States should continue to map and mitigate risks and vulnerabilities in the region that unnecessarily expose the Homeland to terrorism threats emanating from the African continent. That mapping effort must include a constant and rigorous assessment of the risk and vulnerability profile of our land and air borders. As of 2019, at least eleven countries in Africa have a last point of departure air route to the United States.[xx] This datapoint suggests that a terrorist actor in Africa capable and intent on attacking the United States could, after clearing several layers of screening and security protocols, board a flight bound for the United States and use various means to attack the Homeland, either before landing or upon doing so. Similar scenarios include the failed attempt by the 'Underwear Bomber,' a Nigerian national serving life in prison who had been recruited and trained by al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to conduct the airline attack.[xxi] While his flight to Michigan was indirect from Yemen through Europe, this example and others - recall al-Shabaab's failed plot to detonate an explosive-laden laptop in 2016[xxii] and AQAP's intercepted printer bomb in 2010[xxiii] - remain illustrative of how terrorists exploit such vulnerabilities and only need to be lucky once to achieve their objectives.

Our land borders present another vulnerability that terrorist groups in Africa could exploit as thousands of extracontinental migrants and special interest aliens (SIAs) from various countries in Africa have been known to make the dangerous trek to South or Central America onward to the southern border.[xxiv] In previous positions, I have reviewed several sensitive reports and handled in extremis situations that required extensive coordination between U.S. and foreign partners to identify, track, and apprehend SIAs from Somalia and elsewhere in Africa who were enroute to or had crossed our southern border. Various U.S. administrations have taken measures to leverage biometrics and other technology to improve situational awareness along our air and land borders and reduce the threat to the Homeland from known and suspected terrorists.[xxv,xxvi,xxvii]Most of these programs require the U.S. government to actively pursue and cultivate partnerships all over the world that will ensure we continue to close seams and gaps in the vast border network. If the United States determines that its tolerance for risk in this regard is and should remain low, then we must reckon with what lowering that risk requires in terms of additional personnel, fiscal resources, and purposeful diplomatic engagement.

Building Capacities and Strengthening Partnerships

Building and improving partner capacity must continue to be a central part of our counterterrorism and border security strategy, especially in many regions of Africa where borders are often porous and security measures are easily evaded through bribery or overcome by force.

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In my view, the United States has shown exemplary effort in developing and implementing whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to countering terrorism and violent extremism, but decision makers and other stakeholders need to agree that these approaches must use a "both/and" strategy rather than "either/or" to ensure we are successful left and right of the boom. While tradeoffs are unavoidable when resources are finite, the United States cannot afford to compromise on a comprehensive, effective counterterrorism strategy that includes:

- Sustainable physical security measures, including intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance technology;
- High-quality, strategic information sharing agreements such as HSPD-6;
- Sustainable capacity-building programs that facilitate technology transfers; and
- Initiatives that counter radicalization and recruitment, support reconciliation and peacebuilding measures, and promote political stability and reform.

<u>Erosion of Democracy and the Rise of Insecurity</u>

West Africa and the Sahel present a particularly challenging and acute problem set. While the region has never been immune to various forms of instability, the last five years have forced us to reckon with decades of failed and stagnant policies that helped precipitate the spate of coup d'états we are witnessing today. The political convulsions throughout the region, however, should not be viewed as a monolith. The ostensible predicate for the coup in Guinea looks nothing like what transpired in Sudan, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The runup to the recent coup d'état in Gabon is reportedly beset by a complicated brew of ruling family palace intrigue[xxviii] and Great Power Competition.[xxix]

What most of these extra-constitutional movements have in common to varying degrees is the role foreign adversaries aim to have in shaping and further stoking anti-Western sentiments, regardless of whether they are organic or sensationalized.[xxx] The Russian Federation and its proxies such as Wagner and Sewa Security Services continue to make significant headway in exploiting critical minerals and natural resources in exchange for flimsy security cooperation agreements[xxxi] largely because, in my view, these impressionable juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and now Niger have created or intensified political and security vacuums. These natural resources are crucial for the Kremlin's ongoing efforts to evade U.S. and Western sanctions and fund its illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, but the juntas who seek Russia's support to counter terrorism and armed groups in their backyards have been left with little to show for these agreements.[xxxii]

The security situation in Mali and Burkina Faso, which the juntas in these countries used to justify their putsches, has not stabilized or improved. In fact, recent reports indicate that these countries have seen a rise in terrorist attacks since the juntas overthrew their democratically elected governments.[xxxiii] While the Burkinabe, Nigerien, and Malian juntas enter security pacts to protect each, it appears these militaries – before and after their coup d'états - can barely

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protect themselves and their people without considerable external support. For instance, Burkina Faso's military has experienced several mutinous uprisings over the last decade due to lack of pay and inadequate training, resources, and leadership.[xxxiv]

Reassessing the U.S. Approach

This security situation unfolding throughout and beyond West Africa and the Sahel underscores the need for the United States and its likeminded partners to reassess its policy, strategy, and posture on the continent. The situation is complicated, but with sustained political will and sufficient resources, the United States can help change the unfortunate trends in the region. Specific remedies include taking a hard look at how U.S. strategies for engaging in Africa are reconciled with the resources being applied, including U.S. embassy staffing. The United States must consider whether its objectives, programs, and overall ambitions in Africa align with the resources provided for our embassies in Burkina Faso, Niger, and in the Coastal West Africa region, where additional resources provided through the Global Fragility Act will be spread out over five countries.[xxxv]

Unfortunately, U.S. security cooperation throughout Africa has been mischaracterized in a way to suggest that training and equipping African forces is a recipe for coup d'états and political instability. Those who watch the region closely will agree this misperception is dangerous, counterproductive, and fails to address issues that existed long before these partnerships emerged. Building core capacities to counter terrorism, secure borders, and develop regional solutions to regional problems at all levels of government and through civil society is the ideal approach toward balancing the three "Ds" of U.S. foreign policy – defense, development, and diplomacy.

Conclusion

I am encouraged by the Department of Defense's desire to continue developing tools that help get at the threat "left of the boom" – including through civil military operations, exchange programs, and professional development programs like International Military Education & Training (IMET). There is also room to improve upon critical capabilities such as anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism (AML/CFT) programs funded by the Departments of Defense and State that are designed to detect and deter the flow of funds to terror groups like al-Shabaab and ISIS. The United States and its partners are enhancing social network analysis and open-source intelligence technologies as another means of identifying the front and back ends of radicalization and terrorist recruitment networks. Continuing to invest in these and other measures as part of a balanced and strategic counterterrorism approach will redound to the United States' efforts to protect U.S. persons and interests in the region and in the Homeland.

Thank you for holding a hearing on this important topic, as well as your bipartisan commitment to safeguarding the country and its citizens. It has been an honor and a privilege to appear before this committee today and I look forward to answering your questions.

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[i] (Director of National Intelligence 2022)

[ii] (U.S. Department of State n.d.)

[iii] (United Nations n.d.)

[iv] (UK Home Office 2023)

[v] (Department of Defense 2022)

[vi] (U.S. Department of State 2022)

[vii] (U.S. Department of Justice 2020)

[viii] (ABC News 2015)

[ix] (U.S. Department of State 2022)

[x] (Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2022)

[xi] (USIP, Wilson Center 2017)

[xii] (Council on Foreign Relations 2022)

[xiii] (Kaledzi 2021)

[xiv] (United Nations 2022)

[xv] (Council on Foreign Relations 2022)

[xvi] (United Nations 2012)

[xvii] (United Nations 2022)

[xviii] (UK Home Office 2022)

[xix] (USIP, Wilson Center 2017)

[xx] (Sims 2019)

[xxi] (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2015)

[xxii] (BBC 2016)

[xxiii] (U.S. Department of State Bureau of Diplomatic Security (Rewards for Justice) 2023)

[xxiv] (Yates 2019)

[xxv] (U.S. Department of State 2019)

[xxvi] (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2023)

[xxvii] (U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2022)

[xxviii] (Dougueli 2023)

[xxix] (Deutschmann 2023)

[xxx] (Lucas 2023)

[xxxi] (Arieff 2023)

[xxxii] (Sany 2023)

[xxxiii] (Rogan 2023)

[xxxiv] (Al Jazeera 2023)

[xxxv] (National Security Council, Executive Office of the President 2022)

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