
CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

The Current Terrorism Landscape in Africa

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Chairman Lynch, Ranking Member Hice, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on such an important topic.

My name is Joshua Meservey. I am the Senior Policy Analyst for Africa and the Middle East at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own and do not necessarily represent the official position of The Heritage Foundation.

The current African terrorism landscape is grim. Islamist terrorist groups have proliferated in the Sahel region, and many operate at a high tempo. According to the African Center for Strategic Studies, violent Islamist acts have doubled in the Sahel every year since 2015. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project reports that in Burkina Faso, civilian deaths at the hands of terrorists leaped 7,000% percent from November 2018 to March 2019 compared with the same period last year. There are now at least ten Islamist terrorist groups

operating in the Sahel; traditionally, only al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb was active there.

In North Africa, ISIS and al-Qaeda groups continue to be a menace. The ISIS affiliate in the Sinai Peninsula alone has likely killed hundreds of Egyptian military personnel over the years.

Groups in regions we do not usually associate with Islamist terrorism have emerged and are among the deadliest of all African terror groups. Al-Shabab in northern Mozambique, a group distinct from Somalia's al-Shabaab, is so lethal it recently drove Russian mercenaries from the area. The ISIS-linked Allied Democratic Forces originated in Uganda—well before it had ties to ISIS—but operates primarily in the Democratic Republic of Congo where it razes villages and executes civilians in gruesome ways.

Even relative success stories in the fight against African terrorism are showing

worrying signs. International forces drove al-Shabaab in Somalia from its major strongholds years ago, but the group maintains its operational capacity and significant territory, and benefits from the stalemate in which it is locked with its foes. Boko Haram in northwest Nigeria is resurgent after losing most of its territory five years ago, and its splinter group, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), conquered hundreds of square miles and frequently overruns Nigerian military bases.

The Nigeria and Somalia examples in particular highlight the importance of good governance for achieving any sustainable success against African terrorist groups. In Somalia, politicians devote too much time and energy to struggling for political power, which distracts them from delivering security and justice sufficient to give their citizens reason to resist, or at least not acquiesce to, al-Shabaab. In Nigeria, the government has failed to roll back the corruption that enervates the security services, nor has it done enough to rectify the enabling environment in the northwest that makes groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP appealing to some.

This enabling environment—characterized by people within it feeling a sense of marginalization and injustice—is one pillar of the terrorist phenomenon in Africa. The U.S. can do more to address this element of the problem, though African partners have to lead the way. Military operations, including strikes, intelligence sharing with allies, and counterterrorism training for African partner militaries, are a part of the right approach, as judicious military action can degrade terrorist groups enough to provide governments time and space to address the enabling environment. The U.S. can also increase its support for civil society organizations, which are critical to

the development and maintenance of a responsive and honest government.

The other pillar of the Islamist terrorism problem is the fundamentalist, literalist interpretation of Islam that motivates the hardcore of these groups. This problem is more difficult for the U.S. to address as it is a battle that has to be won by the many Muslims who interpret their faith in a tolerant way. The U.S. can ask Muslim countries and organizations that are proactively battling this ideology what help it can give them. Washington should also pressure countries that promote extremist interpretations of Islam to stop, and to begin working to undo some of the damage they have done.

There are no silver bullets in the fight against African terrorism. It will require committed, wise, and persistent action, in concert with like-minded nations, to protect innocent people, our ally countries, and ultimately the American homeland from this continuing danger. Specifically, here are some steps the U.S. can take:

1. Lead the diplomatic effort in Libya. Libyan instability fuels terrorism in North Africa and the Sahel, particularly in Mali. Getting the many states involved in Libya working together to stabilize the country will be hard, but the U.S. is the only power with sufficient diplomatic heft to have a chance of success.
2. Advocate for reforming the MINUSMA mandate. MINUSMA, the U.N. peacekeeping operation in Mali, is currently inefficient and terribly dangerous to serve in. It needs to be reformed to reflect the reality of the situation it is in. It is fighting a war, and its non-warfighting elements need to be

stripped, and its mission must be integrated into a broader regional strategy.

3. Demand accountability from security partners. In 2017, the U.S. rightly suspended aid to the Somali National Army because so much of its assistance was being stolen. Unaccounted for money, food, or weapons fuels the sort of instability in which terrorist organizations thrive.
4. Pressure countries that export extremist ideologies. Saudi Arabia, for example, for decades exported Wahhabism, a virulent strand of Salafism. Salafism is the practice of Islam to which groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS subscribe. It is now incumbent upon such countries to stop any remaining export of Salafism, and to actively undertake the long and difficult work of undoing the damage proselytizing Salafist ideologies has done across the world, including in Africa. The U.S. should also be vigilant of the danger of Turkey using its growing

prominence on the continent to export its own version of Islamism.

5. Work with affected countries to create a strategy for managing returning foreign fighters. Thousands of ISIS fighters and their families are being held in northern Syria. Many will likely be repatriated to their home countries, including to African countries that do not have sufficient capacity for rehabilitating or prosecuting them as appropriate. Other terrorists who avoided capture will, as some already have, return spontaneously as well.
6. Reorient the focus of U.S. humanitarian development programs towards promoting free market solutions to poverty. Such solutions are the only proven approach to relieving poverty, one of the contributing elements to an enabling environment for terrorism.

Thank you again for allowing me to present my thoughts today, and for your interest in a difficult problem that hurts American interests. I look forward to any questions you may have.

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