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Opening Statement Chairman Stephen F. Lynch Subcommittee on National Security “U.S. Counterterrorism Priorities and Challenges in Africa” December 17, 2019

Today we will examine how various terrorist organizations across the African continent continue to threaten U.S. national security interests, as well as the efficacy of U.S. and international counterterrorism efforts to contain, degrade, and ultimately defeat these terrorist threats.

On October 4, 2017, four U.S. special operations soldiers - Sergeant First Class Jeremiah Johnson, Staff Sergeant Bryan Black, Staff Sergeant Dustin Wright, and Sergeant LaDavid Johnson - were tragically killed in an ambush in the western part of Niger. At the time, many Americans did not even know that U.S. forces were deployed in that part of Africa, and the tragedy generated significant public interest in the U.S. counterterrorism mission there.

Since then, the security situation in many parts of Africa, especially the Sahel, has continued to deteriorate. In early 2017, three militant organizations – including al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM - merged to create Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen, or JNIM, which the State Department designated as a foreign terrorist organization in September 2018. Meanwhile, ISIS Greater Sahara, an affiliate of ISIS “core” in Iraq and Syria, remains active and continues to target local military and police forces in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, as well as U.S., French, and UN peacekeeping forces. Just last week, militants killed 71 soldiers in an Army camp in Western Niger, about 115 miles from where the assault on U.S. forces took place in October 2017.

In the Lake Chad Basin region, Boko Haram, which in local dialect means, “Western education is forbidden,” has carried out hundreds of deadly attacks in Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and Chad. In 2016, ISIS West Africa broke away from Boko Haram and created a splinter group, which continues to wage a guerrilla war across northeastern Nigeria, and according to International Crisis Group, quote “has cultivated a level of support among local civilians that Boko Haram never enjoyed and has turned neglected communities in the area and islands in Lake Chad into a source of economic support.”

In Somalia, al Shabaab is fighting to replace the Somali Government with a strict interpretation of Shariah law, but also carries out attacks in neighboring countries, including Kenya and Uganda, and maintains a close relationship with al Qaeda. Meanwhile, ISIS maintains affiliates in the Sinai, Libya, and there is a small, but concerning ISIS-linked cell growing in Mozambique.

The nonpartisan Africa Center for Strategic Studies reports that overall, 2018 witnessed a “record level of activity” as terrorism on the continent continued its steady upward trend. Over the past decade, violent events in Africa increased tenfold – from 288 attacks linked to militant groups in

2009 to 3,050 in 2018. The Center also estimates that there are currently two dozen active militant groups operating in Africa, more than double the number from 2010.

U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Africa to date have focused on enhancing the military and security capabilities of regional partners through training, equipment and operational support, and bilateral assistance. I have led several bipartisan Congressional Delegations to examine key capacity-building and security activities in the region, including a visit to Nigeria to review operations conducted by the Multinational Joint Task Force. Consisting of military units from Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and other nations, the U.S.-backed MNJTF seeks to counter the threat of Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa. We have also visited Camp Lemonnier, a forward operating base in Djibouti where more than 4,000 U.S. military and civilian personnel are deployed in support of regional stabilization, security cooperation, antipiracy, and crisis response operations in the Horn of Africa. Most recently, we visited Algeria to examine the progress of the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership, a multinational program led by the State Department to prevent the spread of violent extremism in West and North Africa, and review the allocation of \$1.3 million in U.S. bilateral aid that Algeria recently received for military education and training.

Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, our national counterterrorism strategy has prioritized the degradation of terrorist threats originating and operating in the Middle East. However, U.S. national security demands that we also maintain sustained pressure on terrorist networks in Africa. As noted by Grant Harris, former Senior Director for African Affairs at the National Security Council under President Obama, the misconception that Africa is optional or irrelevant to U.S. national security is “dangerous” given the boon to terrorist recruitment and operations generated by unstable, weak, and failed states. African nations currently occupy seventeen of the top twenty-five slots on the Fragile States Index issued by the independent Fund for Peace earlier this year.

Moreover, it is critical for the U.S. to develop a comprehensive counterterrorism approach in the region that optimizes American military support, security cooperation, and assistance while advancing diplomatic solutions, civil society reforms, and economic initiatives to promote regional stability in the long term. In his 2019 posture statement to Congress, Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, Commander of U.S. Africa Command, stated that “very few, if any, of Africa’s challenges can be resolved using only military force.” But to the detriment of enduring regional stability, President Trump has consistently proposed massive cuts to international development funding, including a fiscal year 2020 budget proposal that recommended a 24%, or \$40 billion, cut for the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development. The current administration has also been slow to fill critical Africa policy vacancies and according to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace “shows no signs of mounting a vigorous civilian-oriented strategy to address the challenges that do exist.”

Continued oversight of U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Africa will be critical to addressing threats to U.S. national security emanating from the region. To this end, I look forward to discussing these issues with today’s witnesses. I now yield to the Ranking Member of our Subcommittee, Mr. Hice of Georgia, for his opening statement.

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