Statement of

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C hairman Lynch, Ranking Member Hice, and Members of the Subcommittee:
Thank you for inviting the Congressional Research Service to testify today. As requested, I will focus particular attention on current trends in West Africa's Sahel region, which is within my area of specialization at CRS, along with U.S. responses and considerations for congressional oversight. My testimony draws on the input of CRS colleagues who cover other parts of the continent and related issues.

Introduction

Islamist armed groups have proliferated and expanded their geographic presence in sub-Saharan Africa ("Africa," unless noted) over the past decade.[1] These groups employ terrorist tactics, and several have pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda or the Islamic State (IS, aka ISIS or ISIL) and operate across borders. Most, however, also operate as local insurgent movements that seek to attack and undermine state presence and control. Conflicts involving these groups have caused the displacement of millions of people in Africa and deepened existing development and security challenges. Local civilians and security forces have endured the overwhelming brunt of fatalities, as well as the devastating humanitarian impacts. Somalia, the Lake Chad Basin, and West Africa's Sahel region have been most affected (**Figure 1**).[2] The Islamic State also has claimed attacks as far afield as eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and northern Mozambique over the past year.[3]

The extent to which Islamist armed groups in Africa pose a threat to U.S. national security is subject to debate. These groups appear predominantly focused on local targets and objectives, but some have targeted and killed U.S. and other Western civilians and military personnel within the region.[4] It is possible that some Africa-based groups or individuals may also aspire to carry out or inspire attacks outside Africa, but CRS cannot readily gauge their near-term intent or capacity to do so. In its January 2019 *Worldwide Threat Assessment*, the U.S. intelligence community emphasized the threat posed within the region, assessing that "jihadist groups in parts of Africa... in the last year have expanded their abilities to strike local US interests, stoke insurgencies, and foster like-minded networks in neighboring countries."[5] Insofar as these groups have destabilized African states, impeded peaceful coexistence among local communities, and caused great humanitarian hardship, their activities certainly pose a challenge to longstanding stated U.S. foreign policy objectives for Africa.

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[1] As of 2010, two groups active in sub-Saharan Africa were designated by the State Department as "Foreign Terrorist Organizations" (FTOs) under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, as amended: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in North-West Africa and Al Shabaab in Somalia. Nine groups are currently so designated. (State Department annual *Country Reports on Terrorism*, 2009-2018.)
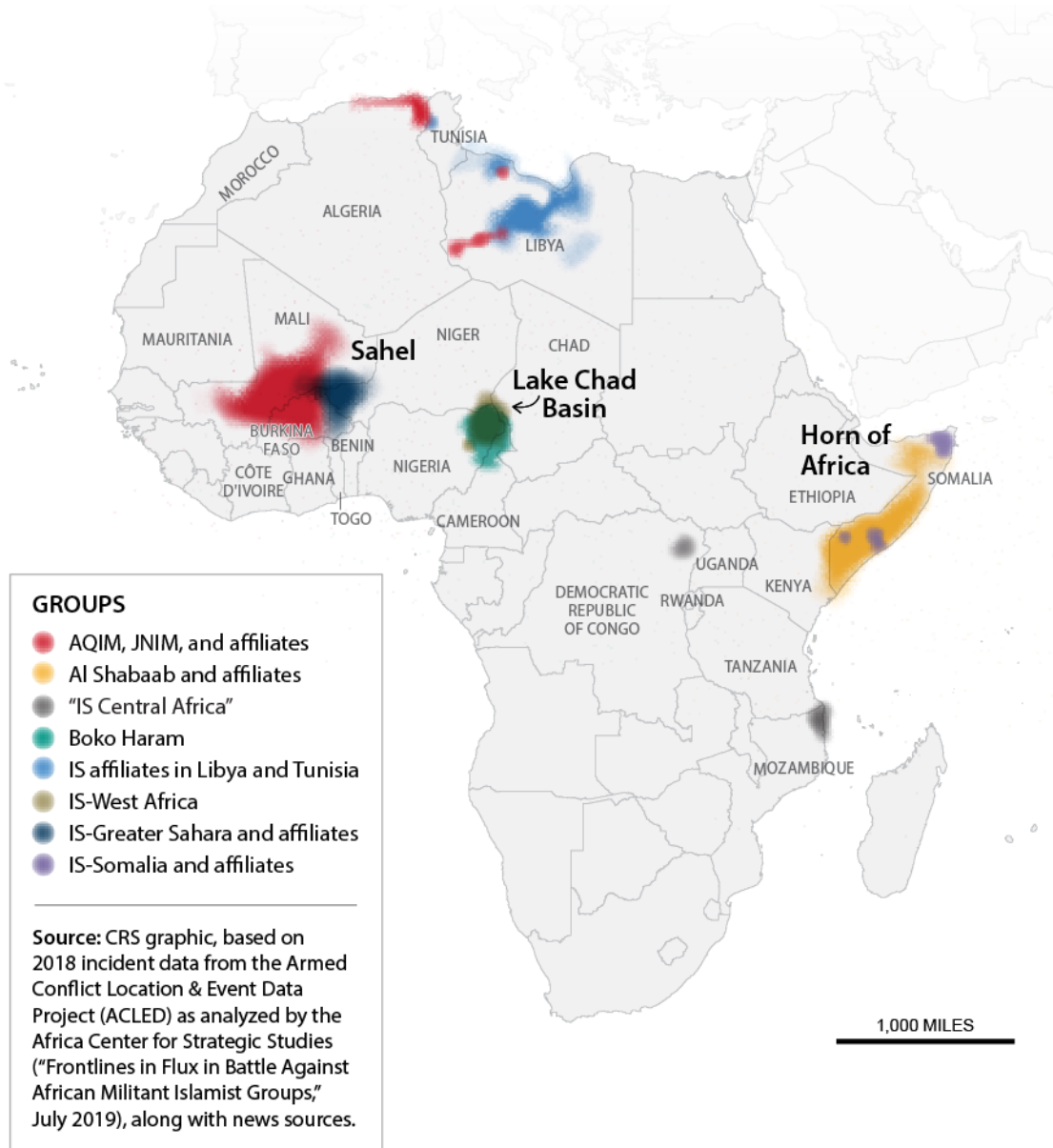
[2] See CRS In Focus IF10155, *Somalia*, by Lauren Ploch Blanchard; CRS Report RL33142, *Libya: Transition and U.S. Policy*, by Christopher M. Blanchard; CRS In Focus IF10173, *Boko Haram and the Islamic State's West Africa Province*, by Lauren Ploch Blanchard and Katia T. Cavigelli; CRS In Focus IF10279, *Cameroon*, by Tomas F. Husted and Alexis Arieff; CRS In Focus IF10116, *Conflict in Mali*; and CRS In Focus IF10434, *Burkina Faso*.

[3] See, e.g., *The Guardian*, "Isis claims sub-Saharan attacks in a sign of African ambitions," June 6, 2019; along with CRS Report R43166, *Democratic Republic of Congo: Background and U.S. Relations*, and CRS Report R45817, *Mozambique: Politics, Economy, and U.S. Relations*, by Nicolas Cook.

[4] The locations of deadly attacks on Western civilians include, for example: the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2013; an international hotel in Bamako, Mali, in 2015; a hotel and restaurant in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in 2016; a resort outside Bamako in 2017; a resort in Grand Bassam, Côte d'Ivoire, in 2016; the French embassy in Ouagadougou in 2018; and the DusitD2 hotel and office complex in Nairobi. Islamist groups have also kidnapped Western civilians, often for ransom. Four U.S. soldiers were killed in an October 2017 attack by a local Islamic State affiliate in western Niger, and French military forces operating in Mali have regularly come under attack.

[5] Then Director of National Intelligence Daniel R. Coats, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," Statement for the Record to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, January 29, 2019.

Figure 1. Selected Islamist Armed Groups in Africa: Key Areas of Activity

Source: CRS graphic, based on 2018 incident data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) as analyzed by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies ("Frontlines in Flux in Battle Against African Militant Islamist Groups," July 2019), along with news sources.

Source: CRS graphic. Areas of activity are based on 2018 incident data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) as analyzed by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies ("Frontlines in Flux in Battle Against African Militant Islamist Groups," July 2019), along with news sources.

Notes: Areas of activity are extrapolated and approximate. AQIM=Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb; JNIM=Union for Supporting Islam and Muslims; IS=Islamic State. "IS Central Africa" is a term used in recent Islamic State propaganda, seeming to refer to a local militia known as the Allied Democratic Forces; the extent of IS ties is debated and the U.S. government has not publicly recognized such a group.

Several key developments underlie worsening regional trends over the past decade. These include the eruption of conflict and near state collapse in Libya and Mali in 2011-2012, the expansion of the Boko Haram crisis in 2014-2015, and the rise and spread of insurgent groups in Burkina Faso since 2016. Somalia remains mired in conflict with Islamist insurgents, most notably the local Al Qaeda affiliate Al Shabaab and a smaller Islamic State-aligned splinter faction. The conflict continues notwithstanding the

ongoing deployment of a U.S.- and European-backed African Union stabilization force (AMISOM) and fragile stability gains since the formation of a federal government in 2012.[6] Al Shabaab has also carried out several large attacks in other countries in the region, notably Kenya.

The State Department's most recent Country Reports on Terrorism estimated Al Shabaab's size at 7,000-9,000 members, which would appear to make it the largest Islamist armed group in Africa, followed by Boko Haram and its Islamic State-aligned splinter faction IS-West Africa.[7] Credible size estimates are not consistently available for all groups, however; nor does relative size necessarily denote intent, capabilities, or resilience. According to open source data, fatalities linked to Islamist armed groups in Africa peaked in 2015; the significant drop since then is largely attributable to a decrease in fatalities tied to Boko Haram.[8] The pace of Islamist armed attacks in the Sahel has continually escalated over the same time period, however. Moreover, the drop in Boko Haram lethality may not signal an end to the threat: IS-West Africa has generally been more disciplined, which may deepen its appeal with local communities and appears to reflect the group's aspirations to operate durably in the area.[9]

Islamist armed activity is not a new phenomenon in Africa. In the nineteenth century, local insurgents fought to establish Islamic states in areas that are now part of Nigeria, Guinea, Mali, and Sudan. Anti-colonial struggles were sometimes framed in religious terms. In the 1990s, Algeria fought a decade-long war against Islamist insurgents after the military canceled election results favoring an Islamist political movement, resulting in as many as 200,000 deaths. Also in the 1990s, Sudan hosted foreign terrorists, including Osama bin Laden, after an Islamist regime came to power in a coup.[10] Al Qaeda's bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 demonstrated the group's reach and ability to recruit from local communities. Insurgent groups in Algeria and Somalia later affiliated with Al Qaeda.[11]

Foreign fighter flows from the continent have long prompted international concern, including most recently with regard to the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. While a majority of African foreign fighters who joined the Islamic State at its height in 2014-2015 came from the Maghreb (Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, and Mauritania), smaller numbers reportedly traveled from Somalia, Sudan, and Kenya, among other countries.[12] The extent of the threat posed by fighters returning to their home countries remains to be seen. Foreign fighter flows to Somalia, including from the United States and other Western countries, have reportedly decreased since 2012 but remain a potential challenge.

The factors driving local recruitment into Islamist armed groups vary, but broadly appear similar to those that spur participation in other types of insurgencies and conflicts. Namely, socially persuasive individuals have mobilized people to engage in violence by exploiting perceptions that certain communities have been excluded from political and economic opportunities, often in the context of illegitimate and ineffective institutions.[13] Religious appeals may find particular resonance in some circumstances, as may

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[6] See CRS In Focus IF10155, *Somalia*, by Lauren Ploch Blanchard.

[7] State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2018*, released on November 1, 2019.

[8] According to data compiled by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), fatalities linked to Islamist armed groups in Africa totaled 18,856 in 2015, of which more than 11,500 were attributed to Boko Haram, compared to 9,744 in 2018, of which approximately 2,700 were attributed to Boko Haram. Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Frontlines in Flux in Battle Against African Militant Islamist Groups," July 9, 2019; and Hilary Matfess, "The New Normal: Continuity and Boko Haram's Violence in North East Nigeria," ACLED. CRS is unable comprehensively to verify ACLED data, which draws on many sources.

[9] See, e.g., International Crisis Group (ICG), "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province," May 16, 2019.

[10] On Sudan's designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, see CRS In Focus IF10182, *Sudan*, by Lauren Ploch Blanchard.

[11] See CRS In Focus IF11116, *Algeria*; CRS In Focus IF10172, *Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Related Groups*; and CRS In Focus IF10170, *Al Shabaab*, by Lauren Ploch Blanchard and Katherine Z. Terrell.

[12] Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, *The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An inside look at the Islamic State's foreign fighter paper trail*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, April 2016;

[13] USAID, C*onflict Assessment Framework: Version 2.0*, June 2012.

financial incentives. It is notable that the escalation of African conflicts involving Islamist actors has played out amid a rise in regional armed conflicts generally over the past decade, reversing a previous trend of relative stabilization.[14]

Challenges for U.S. Policy and Oversight

Notwithstanding ongoing U.S. direct strikes against terrorist targets in Libya and Somalia, successive U.S. Administrations have stated a desire to maintain a light U.S. military footprint in Africa, likely reflecting concerns about both local and U.S. domestic opposition. Military capacity-building efforts and cooperation with local and European partners—what Department of Defense (DOD) officials refer to as working "by, with, and through"[15]—are thus at the forefront of the U.S. counterterrorism toolkit in Africa, along with development assistance aimed at addressing the drivers of so-called violent extremism.

If, however, local political conditions, abuses by state actors, and perceived impunity play a key role in driving Islamist extremist recruitment in Africa—as multiple studies suggest—then additional security and/or development assistance alone may not effectively reverse negative trends absent significant changes in approach on the part of local authorities.[16] A recent study by the State Department and USAID asserted, for example, that while aid can help prevent conflicts, it is more likely to do so when it is "sensitive to conflict risks, closely coordinated with diplomacy, and aligned with host-nation and local civil society reformers."[17]

Almost by definition, the partners whose capacities the United States often seeks to develop are likely to be weak and/or problematic for other reasons. Many are juggling competing policy priorities and security threats, which may not align with U.S. interests or preferences. In turn, the ability of the United States to reshape local elite incentives in Africa may be limited. Where the United States is able to partner with capable Western allies—e.g., U.S. logistical support for France's counterterrorism operations in the Sahel—there may be a greater focus on priority targets. Such interventions, however, have also provoked local criticism, however, and may lend fodder to militant propaganda decrying foreign oppression and neocolonial interference.[18] European policies may also diverge and/or have negative consequences with regard to U.S. aims, for example prioritizing efforts to counter illicit migration flows across the Sahara.[19]

A rough CRS calculation based on available budget and congressional notification data suggests that the State Department and Department of Defense have allocated over $6.5 billion over the past decade for security assistance to African partner states.[20] Such funds have supported various aims including, but not

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[14] Separate from those involving Islamist armed groups, new conflicts have erupted since 2013 in Cameroon, the Central African Republic, parts of DRC, and South Sudan. A number of long-running African conflicts drew to a close in the early 2000s, including civil wars in Angola, Liberia, the Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, and Sudan, along with the regional war in DRC.

[15] Defense.Gov, "Engagement with African Nations Must Matter to Americans," February 15, 2019 [citing Michelle Lenihan, then acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs].

[16] For example, U.S. Institute of Peace, *Preventing Extremism in Fragile States: A new approach*, February 26, 2019; U.S. Department of State, *Stabilization Assistance Review: A framework for maximizing the effectiveness of U.S. government efforts to stabilize conflict-affected areas*, 2018; and U.N. Development Program (UNDP), *Journey to Extremism in Africa*, 2017.

[17] State Department Office of U.S. Foreign Assistance Resources and USAID, *The Strategic Prevention Project: Assessing the role of foreign assistance in preventing violent conflict in fragile states*, 2019.

[18] France24, "Macron tells G5 leaders to address 'anti-French sentiment' for continued military cooperation in Sahel," December 4, 2019.

[19] Some journalists and advocates assert that European-backed efforts to stem migration through the Sahara may be destabilizing to countries such as Niger, a key U.S. and French counterterrorism partner. See, e.g., Peter Tinti, "A Dangerous Immigration Crackdown in West Africa," *The Atlantic*, February 11, 2018.

[20] CRS calculation based on Departments of State and Defense budget documents, congressional notifications, annual joint reports to Congress on Foreign Military Training, and responses to CRS inquiries. Figure includes State Department-administered international security assistance funding allocated specifically for sub-Saharan Africa, for the Trans-Sahara

limited to, counterterrorism capacity building. As of early 2019, U.S. AFRICOM had approximately 7,000 personnel deployed in Africa (the whole continent excluding Egypt) for a range of tasks—not limited to operations or counterterrorism activities.[21] While this level of security spending and military presence may be smaller than in other global regions on a per-country and per-capita basis, it is also high by historic standards for Africa.

The figures above exclude substantial funding for other types of foreign assistance, military operations, and nonmilitary personnel, among other things. For reasons discussed further below, it is not always possible for Congress to obtain a comprehensive view of all U.S. financial, operational, and personnel commitments to counterterrorism efforts in Africa. Sometimes this is due to a lack of information in key budget documents, and at other times, to the difficulty of disaggregating broader diplomatic, military, and foreign assistance initiatives that may support counterterrorism goals without being defined by them.

Focus on West Africa's Sahel Region

Islamist militants are part of a conflict ecosystem in the Sahel that also involves ethnic separatists, communal defense militias, and criminal actors. Mali and Burkina Faso are sub-regional epicenters. The largest Islamist armed group in the Sahel appears to be the Union for Support of Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen, or JNIM after its Arabic transliteration), an Al Qaeda-aligned coalition of groups primarily active in Mali.[22] A splinter movement known as the Islamic State-Greater Sahara is also active in the area. The region's security crises have outpaced the ability of governments and local actors to respond, while deepening existing development, humanitarian, and governance challenges. Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Kéïta declared earlier this year, after large militia massacres of civilians, that Mali's very "survival [is] at stake."[23] U.N. and European officials have called for West African leaders and donors to scale up their response efforts.[24]

Conditions have continued to worsen in Mali despite—or perhaps because of—the 2015 peace deal between the government and northern rebel factions.[25] Burkina Faso appears to be an emerging safe-haven for local factions aligned with either Al Qaeda or the Islamic State—although most attacks in Burkina Faso have gone unclaimed, raising questions about perpetrators' identities.[26] From there, these groups may threaten previously unaffected coastal West African countries such as Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana. The conflicts in Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria, and Libya also have placed particular pressure on neighboring Niger, a fragile democracy and key Western security partner in the region.[27]

Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), and for African countries participating in the Global Peace Operations Initiative, along with DOD funding provided to African countries under §1206 of P.L. 109-163, §2282 of P.L. 113-291, and 10 U.S.C. 333 ("global train and equip"); §1207 of P.L. 112-81 (Global Security Contingency Fund); §1206 of P.L. 112-81 and §1208 of P.L. 113-66 (support to regional operations to counter the Lord's Resistance Army); §1203 of P.L. 112-239 (counterterrorism capacity-building in East Africa); and DOD's Counter-Terrorism Fellowship Program. The figure excludes bilateral security aid funding for Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, but includes some regional programs that include some of these.

[21] U.S. Africa Command, *2019 Posture Statement to Congress*, February 2019.

[22] According to the State Department's *Country Reports on Terrorism 2018*, JNIM's size is estimated at 1,000-2,000 fighters. No estimate was provided for the IS-Greater Sahara faction or for a Burkina Faso-based Islamist group known as Ansar al Islam.

[23] Radio France International (RFI), "Mali president warns 'survival at stake' amid escalating sectarian violence," June 12, 2019.

[24] Reuters, "Greater response needed to worsening West African violence - UN head," July 10, 2019; *Le Monde,* "Après les annonces du G7, où va le G5 Sahel?" August 27, 2019.

[25] See CRS In Focus IF10116, *Conflict in Mali*.

[26] Al Jazeera, "Mystery Behind Burkina Faso Violence Hampering Response to Crisis," December 13, 2019.

[27] While Niger has been spared the level of violence seen in Mali and Burkina Faso to date, it suffered its deadliest single recorded insurgent attack on December 10, 2019, when at least 71 soldiers were killed in an assault on a local military base near the western border with Mali. A local Islamic State affiliate has claimed the attack, according to news reports.

The conflicts in the Sahel are playing out amid larger trends in Africa, including democratic backsliding and the aforementioned broader increase in armed conflicts.[28] The 2011 collapse of the Qadhafi regime in Libya was a shock to the sub-region, as Libya had provided financial support to West African governments, absorbed large numbers of otherwise unemployed men from the Sahel in its oil industry and military, and stockpiled weapons that have since proliferated throughout neighboring countries.[29] Unanticipated political transitions, often prompted by surging discontent against elites perceived as corrupt or authoritarian, have granted opportunities for Islamist armed groups to expand their reach. This was the case in the aftermath of the military coup in Mali (2012) and the popular uprising in Burkina Faso (2014). Such transitions often result in the fragmentation or diversion of the state security apparatus, and may disrupt tacit security or financial arrangements between government and Islamist armed actors that previously constrained the latter's activities within a certain area.[30]

The extent to which the situation in the Sahel has direct, near-term implications for U.S. national security is debatable. To date, the region's armed groups have appeared primarily focused on local and regional targets, notwithstanding some groups' stated affiliation with Al Qaeda or the Islamic State; analysts disagree on the extent to which Al Qaeda or Islamic State leaders control, influence, support, or direct affiliates in the Sahel (and elsewhere). Much of the Sahel region itself is remote and isolated due to poor infrastructure. Local Islamist militants have, however, killed and kidnapped Western nationals in the region, claiming attacks on civilian "soft targets" as well as the deadly 2017 ambush of U.S. soldiers in Niger (and other attacks on French forces operating in the region).[31] U.S. policymakers have expressed concern with the threat that such groups pose to regional stability and, potentially, to European allies.

In November 2019, Secretary of State Pompeo announced at a meeting of the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS that "West Africa and the Sahel would be a preferred initial area of focus for the Coalition outside of the ISIS core space" in Iraq and Syria.[32] The Administration has not publicly detailed the practical implications of such a move.

Several aspects of the crises in the Sahel exemplify broader trends characterizing Islamist armed activity in Africa, and pose particular challenges to the effectiveness of U.S. counterterrorism tools in the region.

Islamist militancy in the Sahel is locally-led and resilient. The first Islamist armed attacks in the Sahel in the mid-2000s were conducted by the Arab-led regional network Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which emerged from Algeria's 1990s civil conflict. Since 2011, however, AQIM has spawned local offshoots and attracted affiliates in Mali and Burkina Faso, which now outpace AQIM in lethality. In 2017, AQIM's Sahel branch announced a merger with several Mali-based Islamist armed factions to form JNIM, which is led by an ethnic Tuareg who is a Malian national.[33] As Islamist armed groups have

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[28] See, e.g., Freedom House, overview of Sub-Saharan Africa, at https://freedomhouse.org/regions/sub-saharan-africa.

[29] See, e.g., Conflict Armament Research, "Investigating Cross-Border Weapons Transfers in the Sahel," November 2016.

[30] Burkina Faso political leaders have asserted that former President Blaise Compaoré (deposed in 2014) maintained ties with regional Islamist armed groups. See, e.g., Deutsche-Welle, "Le président Kaboré dénonce un plan pour l'empêcher de travailler," February 21, 2019. Similar allegations have been made regarding Mauritania, which has not been the target of a major terrorist attack since 2011. (See, e.g., Reuters, "Al Qaeda leaders made plans for peace deal with Mauritania: documents," March 1, 2016.

[31] See footnote 4, along with CRS Report R44995, *Niger: Frequently Asked Questions About the October 2017 Attack on U.S. Soldiers*. Three U.S. civilians have been killed in Islamist terrorist attacks in the Sahel since 2009 (one each in Mauritania, Mali, and Burkina Faso), in addition to the four U.S. soldiers killed in in Niger in October 2017 by IS-Greater Sahara. Three more U.S. civilians were killed in the 2013 terrorist siege in In Amenas, Algeria, which was carried out by an Al Qaeda-aligned faction active in North and West Africa, known as Al Murabitoun. At least one American hostage, seized in Niger in 2016, is reported to be held by an Islamist armed group in the region. In May 2019, French military forces freed a U.S. citizen held by an Islamist armed faction in Burkina Faso, whose kidnapping had not previously been reported.

[32] Remarks at the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Small Group Ministerial, November 14, 2019.

[33] See CRS In Focus IF10172, *Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Related Groups*.

expanded their activities in rural areas of the Sahel, their leaders have increasingly espoused and exploited local grievances related to ethnic identity, livelihoods, and perceived abuses on the part of state authorities.[34] These groups have withstood (and arguably leveraged) a sustained and sophisticated military campaign by France, ground operations by countries in the region, and multilateral stabilization efforts in Mali, as well as international sanctions and grassroots-level conflict resolution efforts.

Abuses by state security forces and state-backed militias may be driving recruitment.[35] Government policies and practices, rather than state weaknesses per se, appear to drive many of the region's security challenges.[36] Notably, state security forces and ethnic militias (which in some cases allegedly benefit from state support) have killed large numbers of civilians in central Mali and northern Burkina Faso extra-judicially during counterterrorism operations, according to multiple accounts.[37] Many abuses (including extra-judicial killings and detentions, as well as torture of detainees) have apparently targeted members of the ethnic Fulani minority, fueling concerns about mass atrocities and even ethnic cleansing.[38] In turn, Islamist armed groups have capitalized on the grievances and fears of victimized communities by offering means of self-protection, revenge, mediation, and justice.[39] In some areas, Islamist insurgents have targeted for attack state representatives (including soldiers, police, and schoolteachers), as well as traditional leaders, who might otherwise offer alternate options for security or dispute resolution.

Western and African-led military interventions can curtail armed groups' territorial control, but they are not a panacea. France's direct military intervention in northern Mali in 2013 succeeded in ousting Islamist armed groups from key population centers over which they had asserted control. French forces have subsequently struggled, however, to respond to insurgents' asymmetric tactics, and whose stronghold has spread from the desert north to densely inhabited central Mali. This has remained the case as France has transitioned its Mali intervention into Operation Barkhane, a durable regional counterterrorism mission that involves about 4,500 French personnel and is headquartered in Chad.[40] France recently announced a new initiative in which European special operations forces are to provide direct support to Malian military forces conducting counterterrorism ground operations.[41] The move arguably reflects a tacit acknowledgment that, although French strikes have killed top insurgent leaders, and although European troops have helped train local military and civilian security forces in several Sahel countries, these efforts have not been sufficient to deliver greater security on the ground.

The continued presence of troops from the region's former colonial power, France, has presented opportunities to jihadist propagandists; Bamako residents have protested Barkhane's inability to end the insurgency, its disinterest in confronting non-jihadist (e.g., ethnic separatist) armed groups, and alleged

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[34] Reuters, "Why Niger and Mali's cattle herders turned to jihad," November 12, 2017; ICG, *Forced out of Towns in the Sahel, Africa's Jihadists Go Rural*, January 2017.

[35] Corinne Dufka, "Burkina Faso's atrocities in the name of security will help terrorists' ranks [op-ed]," *Washington Post*, June 12, 2019; ACLED, "A Vicious Cycle: The Reactionary Nature of Militant Attacks in Burkina Faso and Mali," May 31, 2019; and ICG, *The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North*, October 2017.

[36] ICG, *The Sahel: Promoting Political Alongside Military Action*, January 31, 2018; Reuters, "Why Niger and Mali's cattle herders turned to jihad," November 12, 2017.

[37] See, e.g., Human Rights Watch (HRW), *"We Found Their Bodies Later That Day": Atrocities by armed Islamists and security forces in Burkina Faso's Sahel region*, March 22, 2019; *"We Used to Be Brothers": Self-defense group abuses in central Mali*, December 7, 2018; and "Mali: Unchecked Abuses in Military Operations," September 8, 2017; U.N. Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent Expert on the Situation of Human Rights in Mali*, January 21, 2019, U.N. doc. A/HRC/40/77.

[38] ICG, "Central Mali: Putting a Stop to Ethnic Cleansing [Q&A]," March 25, 2019; U.S. Holocaust Museum Memorial Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, *Regions at Risk: Preventing mass atrocities in Mali*, April 2018.

[39] See Institute for Security Studies (ISS), *Extrémisme violent, criminalité organisée et conflits locaux dans le Liptako-Gourma*, December 2019.

[40] See https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/barkhane/dossier-de-reference/operation-barkhane.

[41] *L'Opinion*, "La force militaire Takouba, dernière invention française pour le Mali," November 18, 2019.

civilian casualties.[42] Illustrative of the challenges of Western military intervention in support of weak and/or problematic governments in the Sahel, French military assets stationed in the region deployed in early 2019 to protect the government of Chad from an advance by non-Islamist rebels, underscoring both the fragility and the importance of Chad's authoritarian regime for France's regional security interests.[43]

Recognizing these challenges, Western and regional leaders have sought to stand up African-led military cooperation efforts to counter Islamist insurgents and other cross-border security threats. The United States has supported several of these initiatives. The Nigerian-led Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF, comprising Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Benin) has had some success in reversing Boko Haram's territorial gains in the Lake Chad Basin. The countries of the G5 Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mauritania, and Chad) have more recently sought to muster a coordinated force to patrol border regions.

The effectiveness of such efforts has been constrained, however, by limited resources and capacity, conflicting political agendas, corruption, regional rivalries, and uneven engagement. Moreover, the focus on military operations among G5 Sahel states and their Western partners has not been complemented by locally-led political or security reforms that could help isolate Islamist militants from overlapping ethnic and criminal networks. Local governments' increased emphasis on countering armed groups militarily has also come at the potential expense of support for socioeconomic development initiatives.

Islamist armed groups appear to rely on local funding to finance activities and recruitment. According to U.N. sanctions monitors and regional experts, local criminal activities provide a key source of funding for Islamist armed groups in the Sahel, whether via direct involvement in activities such as smuggling and kidnap-for-ransom, or via the extortion of criminal actors seeking to travel along routes that the armed groups control.[44] Borders in the sub-region tend to be porous; smuggled goods may include subsidized fuel and foodstuffs, untaxed goods such as cigarettes, wildlife products, locally mined gold, narcotics, and/or arms. Non-Islamist armed groups also reportedly profit from smuggling, as do state actors. The importance of drug smuggling in particular as a source of financing for Islamist armed activities in North-West Africa is debated among analysts.[45] In any case, a reliance on local and illicit sources of financing may reduce the effectiveness of international financial sanctions tools, which require some exposure to the global financial system.

Affected countries face competing policy and security priorities. The challenges and pressures faced by local elites and populations do not always align with U.S. counterterrorism priorities. Elite decisions may be driven by political calculations, security threats from non-Islamist actors, financial considerations, and geopolitical rivalries, for example. Rural civilians often view communal self-defense militias as protectors, even if abuses by these militias may drive militant recruitment among rival communities.

U.S. Tools and Resources

The United States has used various approaches and tools to respond to Islamist armed activity in the Sahel, including authorities and funds explicitly granted by Congress. Key lines of effort are discussed below. Diplomatic engagement and public diplomacy are also part of the U.S. toolkit in the region.

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[42] *Libération*, "Au Mali, 'le sentiment antifrançais est à son paroxysme,'" June 13, 2019.

[43] *The Economist*, "France is propping up a strongman in Chad," February 16, 2019.

[44] See ISS, *Extrémisme violent, criminalité organisée et conflits locaux dans le Liptako-Gourma*, December 2019; Reuters, "How Jihadists Struck Gold in Africa's Sahel," November 22, 2019; International Crisis Group (ICG), *Getting a Grip on Central Sahel's Gold Rush*, November 13, 2019; *Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali and extended pursuant to resolution 2432 (2018)*, U.N. doc. S/2019/636.

[45] See, e.g., ICG, *Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali*, December 13, 2018.

Security assistance and security cooperation with African partners. U.S. security assistance to Sahel countries includes military, border security, and police aid provided under a long-running State Department-led regional counterterrorism program, the Trans Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP)—which also includes some development aid—along with DOD-provided training and equipment. The State Department provides additional security assistance to countries in the region under other regional initiatives, including the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund and Africa Regional Counter Terrorism program. Niger appears to have been the top cumulative recipient of U.S. counterterrorism training and equipment in the Sahel over the past decade, followed by Mauritania and Chad; funding for Burkina Faso also has grown in response to that country's worsening security crisis.[46] Military aid to Mali remains constrained by human rights and other policy concerns, but the country has received sizable counterterrorism aid focused on civilian security capacity in recent years.

U.S. counterterrorism assistance is provided to Sahel countries under multiple statutory authorities and overlapping programs, including DOD's "global train and equip" program—currently authorized under 10 U.S.C. 333—and the State Department's Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) account (22 U.S.C. 2348). Despite its name, PKO assistance does not exclusively support peacekeeping capabilities: PKO funding is the main vehicle for State Department ("Title 22") military aid to Africa, including under TSCTP, and has been the primary conduit of $111 million in funding pledged by the United States to the G5 Sahel.[47]

Military operations. The U.S. military has not acknowledged any direct strikes against terrorist targets in the Sahel, in contrast to Somalia and Libya,[48] although in late 2017, the government of Niger agreed that U.S. unmanned ISR aircraft stationed there (see below) could be armed.[49] The scope of potential operations has not been publicized. Separately, a U.S. regional military activity known as Operation Juniper Shield (OJS), budgeted at $59 million in FY2018, provides "support" to TSCTP, presumably by building African partner state capacity.[50] Congress also has authorized DOD to provide support to "foreign forces, irregular forces, groups, or individuals engaged in supporting or facilitating ongoing military operations" by U.S. special operations forces to combat terrorism, though DOD does not generally disclose the precise locations of such programs.[51] In congressional testimony in early 2019, then-Commander of U.S. AFRICOM General Thomas Waldhauser stated that AFRICOM had not been granted "offensive strike capabilities or [executive] authorities" outside Libya and Somalia, while asserting that any U.S. forces accompanying local forces on counterterrorism missions would have an "inherent right of self-defense and collective self-defense," were they to come under attack.[52]

In late 2018, DOD announced that it would reduce the U.S. military presence in West Africa in light of competing global priorities laid out in the Administration's National Security Strategy (emphasizing "great power" competition) and in the aftermath of the 2017 attack on U.S. soldiers in Niger.[53] Precisely

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[46] CRS calculation based on State Department and DOD congressional notifications.

[47] On PKO funding in Africa and related oversight challenges, see CRS Testimony by Lauren Ploch Blanchard, Specialist in African Affairs, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health, "U.S. Security Assistance in Africa," June 4, 2015.

[48] In both of those countries, successive Administrations have invoked the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) enacted by Congress following the September 11 terrorist attacks, as well as other legal and constitutional authorities and principles. See CRS Report R43983, *2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force: Issues Concerning Its Continued Application*, by Matthew Weed.

[49] *New York Times*, "Niger Approves Armed U.S. Drone Flights, Expanding Pentagon's Role in Africa," November 30, 2017.

[50] Office of the Secretary of Defense, FY2020 *Justification for Component Contingency Operations, the Overseas Contingency Operation Transfer Fund (OCOTF)*, May 2019.

[51] Currently authorized under 10 U.S.C. 127e.

[52] Hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, U.S. Africa Command and Southern Command, February 7, 2019.

[53] DOD, "Pentagon Announces Force Optimization," November 15, 2018; see also CRS Report R44995, *Niger: Frequently*

how and to what extent the downsizing will be implemented remains unclear, as do the implications for specific missions and programs.[54]

Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activities. DOD has deployed hundreds of personnel to Niger and Cameroon, and constructed a new Air Force facility in the northern Niger town of Agadez (located within a Nigerien military base), to support regional ISR operations. (Starting in 2013, U.S. military ISR aircraft have been stationed in Niamey, Niger's capital.) Congress explicitly authorized funds for construction of the Agadez facility, which was led by U.S. active duty military personnel.[55] The facility recently was declared operational, after several delays.[56] Media outlets have reported ISR activities by other U.S. entities in the Sahel, but these have not been confirmed by U.S. officials.[57]

Support to French counterterrorism operations. The U.S. military has provided logistical support to French counterterrorism operations in the Sahel region since early 2013, when France deployed its military to Mali to halt an Islamist insurgent advance. France reorganized and expanded its deployment in 2014 under Operation Barkhane. DOD support has included aerial refueling, aerial resupply, and intelligence sharing.[58] Congress has explicitly authorized DOD logistical support to be provided on a non-reimbursable basis in this context.[59]

Targeted Sanctions. The U.S. Treasury Department has designated individuals and groups based in the Sahel for targeted travel and financial sanctions under Executive Order 13224 (pertaining to global terrorism, as amended by Executive Order 13886). The State Department has designated several Al Qaeda- and IS-aligned groups active in the Sahel as FTOs.

Support for the U.N. stabilization mission in Mali (MINUSMA). MINUSMA does not have an explicit mandate to engage in counterterrorism operations, but the mission is arguably part of a broader set of international efforts to shore up stability and state legitimacy in Mali and thereby deny operational space to Islamist armed groups. As a permanent, veto-capable member of the U.N. Security Council, the United States supported the establishment of MINUSMA in 2013 and has voted annually to renew the mission, with various mandate revisions. The United States also is the top contributor to MINUSMA's budget under the U.N. system of assessed contributions for peacekeeping operations, allocating $317 million in FY2018 appropriations for the mission.[60]

Asked Questions About the October 2017 Attack on U.S. Soldiers.

[54] In March 2019, then-Commander of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) General Thomas Waldhauser testified that AFRICOM had been directed to implement a first tranche of reductions, in which "roughly 300" U.S. military personnel would be removed from the continent by June 2020. Waldhauser cast doubt, however, on plans for further troop cuts, noting that it remained to be seen whether AFRICOM would "ever be directed to execute the second half" of reductions and pledging to "push back" on cuts that were not in the United States' "best interest." Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, *National Security Challenges and U.S. Military Activities in the Greater Middle East and Africa*, March 7, 2019.

[55] FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 114-92), Title XXIII--Air Force Military Construction, §2301 (b). These funds were specifically requested by the Air Force; see U.S. Department of the Air Force, Military Construction Program Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 Budget Estimates, February 2015. The latter budget document described the facility as intended to be "capable of supporting C-17 and miscellaneous light and medium load aircraft," including for ISR purposes.

[56] *Air Force Times*, "Armed Drones to Fly Out of Niger Air Base Now Operational After Delayed Completion," November 1, 2019.

[57] *New York Times*, "C.I.A. Drone Mission, Curtailed by Obama, Is Expanded in Africa Under Trump," September 9, 2018.

[58] DOD, "Secretary of Defense Mattis Holds Media Availability With U.S. Africa Command Commander Gen. Thomas Waldhauser in Djibouti," April 23, 2017.

[59] DOD support is currently provided under 10 U.S.C. 331, enacted by Congress as part of global security cooperation reforms adopted under the FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 114-328). Previously, in the FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act, Congress authorized DOD to provide "support to national military forces of allied countries for counterterrorism operations in Africa" (§1207 of P.L. 114-92).

[60] FY2020 Congressional Budget Justification, Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs. See also CRS In Focus IF10597, *United Nations Issues: U.S. Funding of U.N. Peacekeeping*, by Luisa Blanchfield.

Development assistance. Some U.S. development assistance for the Sahel is aimed at addressing local socioeconomic grievances that may drive militant recruitment, promoting good governance, mitigating conflict, and otherwise countering "violent extremist" ideology.

While some approximate funding figures are provided above, the overall cost of these activities and programs is difficult to determine. Executive branch budget documents and congressional appropriations measures do not always disaggregate the cost of certain foreign assistance, or civilian and military personnel assignments, on a country-specific basis, for example. Some counterterrorism activities, and their costs, are classified. Some foreign assistance, including military aid, is allocated toward broad stability and security aims that may partially overlap with counterterrorism interests.

Potential Oversight Considerations

It is challenging to assess the impact of U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel. While U.S. funding for security and stabilization efforts has increased over the past decade, security trends have worsened. On the other hand, it is difficult to gauge whether worse scenarios would have arisen in the absence of U.S. involvement. While some countries that have received significant U.S. and other international support—such as Niger and Mauritania—have remained relatively stable amid regional turmoil, others—such as Mali—have continued to deteriorate.

That U.S. security and stabilization assistance funds are provided to African countries under a wide range of legal authorities and programs may also create certain challenges. The U.S. government's 2018 *Stabilization Assistance Review* called for Congress to appropriate stabilization assistance on a broad and flexible basis, citing as examples State Department PKO and USAID Transition Initiatives funding authorities, along with recent counter-IS Relief and Recovery Fund appropriations. Greater flexibility may allow agencies on the ground to respond quickly to changing circumstances, and alter their approaches if needed.

There may be a trade-off, however, between granting flexibility and ensuring opportunities for oversight. A lack of information on where and how funds are likely to be spent can pose obstacles for congressional oversight, potentially obscuring policy dilemmas stemming from the behavior of counterterrorism partners. The notification and reporting requirements that Congress has imposed on DOD for its "global train and equip" program under 10 U.S.C. 333, for instance, may be considered a model in enabling effective oversight, as they require detailed information about country and security force unit recipients, the equipment and training to be provided, and other security assistance allocated to the country. There is no analogous statutory requirement attached to Title 22 (State Department) security assistance authorities. Most State Department-administered security assistance for African countries—including in the Sahel—is allocated via regional or centrally-managed programs, meaning that it is generally not broken out by country in budget documents or otherwise routinely available to Congress.

Outlook

In assessing U.S. policy approaches to terrorism in Africa, potential issues for Congress include:

- whether U.S. national security interests are sufficiently implicated to warrant new (or continued) investments of aid funding, military deployments, and/or security partnerships;

- whether such investments may effectively constitute preventative action to avert future threats to U.S. national security;

- whether (and which) U.S. policy tools are well suited to addressing the nature of the security challenges that exist in the Sahel and other regions of Africa;

- whether and how the United States should work with authoritarian or abusive state actors for counterterrorism purposes, and what the unintended consequences might be;

- whether other international partners are willing and able to positively influence developments in the region, or whether their interventions present challenges to U.S. interests; and

- whether executive branch departments and agencies provide sufficient programmatic, funding, and impact evaluation information to Congress to enable effective oversight.

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