

**Statement of Robert W. Jenkins, Assistant to the Administrator for the Bureau of Conflict Prevention and Stabilization, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee**

Tuesday, July 12, 2022

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for bringing attention to the urgent needs of this critically important region.

Looking across the Sahel, USAID sees a region where the confluence of U.S. national security interests means that we must devote attention and resources to supporting key partners. We also see a region that is particularly fragile, with weak governments characterized by corruption and lack of accountability, unprofessional security forces, limited services and opportunities for citizens, intercommunal conflicts, large gender inequalities, and armed groups looking to recruit.

Each country has a youth bulge, which presents tremendous opportunities but could prove dangerous if other issues are not addressed. In addition, countries are still grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic, which has not only placed already weak health systems under strain but also reduced the overall presence of states, exacerbated social fragmentation, created economic hardship, and opened spaces for armed groups to exploit. Climate change is taking a particularly strong toll on countries across the Sahel, prompting increased competition and opening fissures between communities. Putin's war on Ukraine is harming food security and economic growth in the region. Meanwhile, democratic governance—the best mechanism to identify peaceful solutions to political problems, including those underpinning much of this violence—is under assault, with several extra-constitutional changes in governments in recent years.

These diverse conflicts and societal fractures in turn give violent extremist organizations, both international and local, opportunities to exploit, recruit, and perpetuate existing conflict. While our development and humanitarian assistance programs—from the fight against COVID-19 to education to a variety of life saving interventions—are achieving positive results for people in the Sahel, we cannot ignore the growing violence and instability threatening the progress we hope to achieve in the region.

The Sahel provides a striking example of the threats and challenges posed by violent extremists and conflict. In Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Chad, armed groups have challenged states' authority and legitimacy, recruited disaffected youth into their ranks, exacerbated ethnic tensions, aligned themselves with groups like Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and Boko Haram, and used an extended period of simmering war and violence to grow and expand their influence. According to the 2022 Global Terrorism Index, 48 percent of terrorism deaths worldwide occurred in sub-Saharan Africa, and three countries in the Sahel—Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger—suffered some of the largest annual increases. Since 2007, terrorism deaths in

the region have increased by more than 1,000 percent, and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Al Qaeda's branch in the Sahel, is the world's fastest growing terrorist organization. This violence has caused widespread displacement, including more than 2 million people in Burkina Faso—10 percent of its population. Worryingly, several extremist groups have evolved beyond simply carrying out attacks; they now look to fill roles of the state, whether collecting revenue, administering so-called justice, or expanding their recruitment pool, including not just fighters, but also their families.

The governments of the Sahel are ill-equipped to manage and respond to these unprecedented threats to security, despite substantial support from the United States and its allies. Recent coups in Mali and Burkina Faso are both a symptom of the ineffectiveness of their civilian governments and a barrier to continued U.S. security assistance. Niger, with its democratically elected government and more capable security forces, remains a linchpin in our efforts to promote stability in the region, but it too is vulnerable as it has four separate violent extremist groups active in its borders. Many of the grievances that have led to increasing vulnerability to extremist influence in neighboring countries are also present in Niger, including poor service delivery, lack of economic opportunity, and an ill-functioning justice system. We must therefore reinforce our partnership with the Government of Niger to help it withstand the threat posed by terrorist organizations; our support must also include strengthening the resilience of vulnerable communities against the influence of violent extremists. We should also continue to support Mauritania, particularly as an example of how democratic governments can deliver for their people. Meanwhile, we must think creatively about how the United States can work with military-led governments to support their return to democracy while also tackling the grave security challenges that threaten U.S. interests.

Other developments in the region—most notably the ongoing withdrawal of French forces from Mali—are shifting the landscape and necessitating a recalibration about how to address the threat posed by violent extremist groups in concert with our international partners. Continued support for and coordination with regional political and security organizations, like the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU), will need to play a more prominent role in our strategic approach going forward. We appreciate, for instance, recent efforts by ECOWAS to encourage timely democratic transitions in Mali and Burkina Faso, as well as Guinea. We can also leverage our new membership in the Sahel Alliance to influence other like-minded donors active in the region.

Violent extremist groups are not, however, the only threat to U.S. interests in the Sahel. Our strategic rivals also seek to exploit the situation to pursue their own nefarious interests. Most notably, the Kremlin-backed Wagner Group has deployed to Mali, among other countries on the continent and throughout the world, and is credibly accused of atrocities against civilians. In April, Human Rights Watch reported that Malian armed forces and “associated foreign soldiers” executed 300 civilians in the town of Moura. Meanwhile, disinformation campaigns have targeted Western governments and promoted Russia as a more suitable security partner for countries in the region.

Compounding the deterioration of conditions in the Sahel is the territorial spread of violent extremist groups. Countries like Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo must now grapple with the risk of attacks and recruitment from violent extremist groups. A decade ago, many of us would not have imagined these scenarios for a place like Ghana. In light of this risk, USAID is investing people and resources in Coastal West African countries as part of an integrated U.S. Government effort through the Global Fragility Act (GFA) and the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability with the goal of weakening violent extremist groups' appeal, curbing their opportunities to make inroads in these places, and building the resilience of governments and societies. Part of how we will define success in West Africa is keeping violent extremist groups from challenging governments, recruiting disaffected citizens, and carrying out attacks in coastal states the way they have elsewhere in the region. Complementary to that effort will be tackling instability in the Sahel.

On top of the security challenges facing the Sahel, the region is also experiencing a food security emergency. The combined effects of Russia's war on Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, long-term complex emergencies, and multiseason droughts and other effects of climate change have created an unprecedented crisis. The United Nations estimates that more than 40 million people will face food shortages during the upcoming lean season in West Africa. In the Sahel, this is exacerbated by an existing poor harvest and the effects of conflict that continue to deplete household food stocks and resources. Countries across the Sahel are also struggling to secure imports of fertilizer, grains, and other critical commodities. For example, the International Fertilizer Development Center (IFDC) estimates that Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have less than half of their typical fertilizer stocks. Shortfalls of this scale could significantly reduce crop yields, food availability, and household incomes. Lessons learned from severe food security emergencies in 2017 indicate that incidence of gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, early and forced marriage, child labor, family separation, and other negative coping strategies increase sharply during periods of acute food insecurity.

The human toll of these overlapping crises is enough to give us pause, but the proliferation of violent extremist activity in the Sahel—on top of ongoing conflicts already stressing under-capacitated governments with competing interests—has implications for American security. While USAID supports a rebalanced approach to counterterrorism, a number of increasingly experienced armed violent extremist groups with links to international terrorist groups still presents risks to Americans, the United States, and our interests, allies, and partners. As violent extremist groups grow, recruit, network, and become more emboldened, so too do the risks to our overseas facilities and personnel. The United States must prepare to confront future threats, but in our recalibration, we must continue to pay attention to the threat posed by violent extremist groups in places like the Sahel.

I firmly believe U.S. foreign assistance has a role to play in promoting stability and preventing the expansion of violent extremism in the Sahel, supporting partner governments to manage and transform conflict and violence, and ensuring communities are more resilient to recurrent threats. U.S. policy and our approach to advancing our strategic objectives in the years ahead requires fresh thinking and a new set of tools. Our approach must entail elevating policies and

programs that simultaneously limit or reduce democratic backsliding, corruption, and other drivers of illegitimacy, combat disinformation, and limit openings for malign external influence in the five Sahelian states and their neighbors. In particular, we will need to work with the region's military-led governments to achieve timely and credible transitions to democracy. To counter disinformation campaigns by malign actors, we must improve our public outreach to better convey the benefits of partnering with the United States and the generosity of the American people. We will build on our excellent development programs that are delivering results and we must strengthen coordination across the interagency and cooperation with like-minded allies and partners to build institutional capacity across sectors. In addition, our work will require close, genuine partnerships with local actors, including governments and civil society, to shift more leadership, ownership, decision making, and implementation to the people and institutions who possess the capability, connectedness, and credibility to drive change in their own countries and communities.

It will be important for U.S. foreign assistance to the Sahel to include bolstering national institutions and policy reforms; promoting local-level civilian protection, service delivery, and development; improving partner coordination; optimizing coordination around food security and humanitarian assistance; and countering unhelpful external actors and disinformation campaigns. We must support timely democratic transitions in Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mali, and critical political, social, economic, and governance reforms across the region to reduce corruption and prevent further democratic erosion. U.S. assistance should also enable governments to enhance their presence in underserved areas and decentralize their service delivery, foster increased citizen trust in their governments, mitigate the risk of inter-communal conflict, improve business-enabling environments, and reduce cycles of political instability by demonstrating that democracy can deliver tangible benefits to all. We must also help our partners adapt to and manage consequences of ongoing climate change and displacement in the Sahel. None of this work will take root without strengthening and expanding the role of African institutions in balancing regional threats and opportunities with underlying macroeconomic conditions. The United States must similarly improve its coordination with other donors and allies to increase synchronization across development, humanitarian, and peace-building programming, and burden sharing while also countering the propaganda and disinformation generated by strategic competitors.

Finally, I appreciate this opportunity to share my views on what more Congress could do to help USAID and the rest of the U.S. Government protect its interests and advance its objectives in the Sahel. The scale of the challenges facing the region and the ever-changing nature of conflicts there have and would continue to benefit from increased flexibility in appropriated funding. These flexible contingency resources have allowed us to adapt as fast as the facts and needs on the ground change. It is a model that has succeeded and one USAID wants to scale to the size of the problem; we appreciate your continued consideration of flexible funds. Similarly, USAID sees great utility in a further conversation on flexible hiring mechanisms and better incentivizing our people to fill positions in the field where they are needed, often side-by-side with Department of Defense and the Department of State colleagues. Our Missions and offices in the region are chronically understaffed even though the work is critical to our national

security. For all the enthusiasm of an integrated approach between departments and agencies here in Washington, the greatest difference comes in the field, alongside colleagues and international partners tackling these complex challenges together.

Thank you again for convening this important hearing.