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**U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
“Terrorism and Instability in sub-Saharan Africa: A Good Governance Imperative”
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Mr. Chairman, ranking member Cardin, and distinguished members of the Committee, on behalf of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), I appreciate the opportunity to discuss terrorism and instability and make the case for why democracy and good governance should be a central component of any counterterrorism and stabilization strategy in Sub-Saharan Africa. For more than 30 years, NDI has worked around the world to establish and strengthen political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness, and accountability in government. The Institute has conducted programs in, or worked with participants from approximately 50 of Africa’s 54 countries; and I have been fortunate to be part of our efforts in many of those countries for the past two decades.

Introduction

Terrorist activity in sub-Saharan Africa over the past decade threatens to destabilize the continent and roll back some of the gains in broadening political space and participation since the global wave of democratization that began in the 1990s. Groups such as Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad basin, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI) in northern Mali and the Sahel, and Al-Shabaab in Somalia and the Horn of Africa have caused tens of thousands of deaths and tremendous economic and social dislocations of civilian populations. Some of these extremist organizations operating in Africa are eager to establish alliances with violent extremist organizations in other parts of the world, notably Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The international community is right in supporting counterterrorism efforts that seek to defeat these extremist groups militarily and must, at the same time, assist the affected countries to address the root causes and triggers of the rise in extremism and violence on the continent.

The principal motivation of today's terrorists in sub-Saharan Africa is deeply rooted in a pattern of religious beliefs; however, it is noteworthy that governance failures have exacerbated the impact of this phenomenon and created an enabling environment in which extremism thrives. When a state collapses, as was the case with Somalia prior to the emergence of Al-Shabaab, or allows for huge swaths of ungovernable spaces, as was the case in Northern Mali, or fails to fulfill its basic purpose of providing citizens with access to a meaningful life, liberty, and property, as in northeastern Nigeria, the social contract between the state and the citizenry is broken. Discontent with governments that are viewed as illegitimate or ineffective is a fertile ground for recruitment as disaffected individuals may easily embrace extremism hoping to

access a better life, political power or voice and the resources linked to these attributes in transition environments. Moreover, oppressed citizens and marginalized groups that are denied access to basic public goods and services and opportunities are more vulnerable to extremist appeals and indoctrination by non-state actors who in return promise to fulfill their needs. Efforts to counter violent extremism and terrorism in sub-Saharan Africa must, therefore, address poor governance as part of the overall strategy. Based on institutional lessons learned through NDI's work, my own experience and expertise as an African, and what I hear loud and clear from African democrats -- leaders and activists alike -- across the continent, I would strongly offer the following three recommendations for your consideration:

- Any counterterrorism strategy for Africa should be grounded in the consolidation of democracy and good governance such that short term military victories can be sustained in the medium to long term. We cannot defeat violent extremism now only to take up the same fight five, 10 years down the road.
- Autocratic regimes should not get a pass from the international community solely because they are good partners in the fight against terrorism. Shrinking political space, frequent and overt violations of citizen rights and freedoms, and the undermining of constitutional rule and meaningful elections breed discontent and disaffection that form the fertile ground for recruiters and perpetrators of violence and extremism. Good partners in countering violent extremism and terrorism can and should be good performers in democratic governance. These two principles are not mutually exclusive; in fact they are mutually reinforcing.
- Africans of this generation are jittery and extremely fearful of reliving the experience of the Cold War era during which dictatorships thrived amidst grave human deprivation and gross human rights abuses just because some leaders were allies of the West at the time. The fight against terrorism should not become a substitute for the Cold War paradigm of this century with regards to sub-Saharan Africa.

Governance Gaps and Extremism

According to a 2009 report by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), marginalized citizens who feel excluded from the political process may turn to extremist groups to fight for inclusion or to gain a sense of belonging.¹ Also, a 2014 study by academics at the University of Illinois, Chicago, and Pennsylvania State University found that countries where ethnic groups are excluded from political power suffer from more domestic terror attacks.² Unfortunately, in many African countries the politics of exclusion remains a reality. Identity politics, buttressed by subjective criteria such as ethnicity, region of origin, and in a few cases religion, breeds discontent and dissatisfaction within communities.

¹ USAID. [Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism](#). February 2009.

² Seung-Whan Choi and James A. Piazza. "[Ethnic groups, political exclusion and domestic terrorism](#)," Defense and Peace Economics. December 11, 2014.

Poor governance accounts for low and uneven rates of economic and human development, poor service delivery, and lack of opportunities for gainful employment and/or prosperity and societies with these traits tend to be breeding grounds in which extremist groups thrive.³ Dissatisfaction with a government's failures to ensure a reasonable quality of life can lead to radicalization and a rejection of central authority.

Democratic governance is critical to every counterterrorism strategy -- before, so citizen grievances are not allowed to fester and breed extremism, dissatisfaction, and alienation from the state; during, to deprive extremists of possible recruitment grounds; and after, to sustain the peace that would have been gained militarily for the medium to long term. Excessive deprivation in both economic terms and in access to political voice, freedom, and civil liberties makes young people vulnerable to the recruitment incentives of extremist movements.

Particularities of the Terrorist Trends in Sub-Saharan Africa

According to the Institute for Economics and Peace's Global Terrorism Index (2015), sub-Saharan Africa experienced the second highest number of terrorism-related casualties in 2014, with more than 10,000 deaths.⁴ The greatest terrorist impacts were in northern Nigeria and neighboring countries in the Lake Chad basin, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa.

Boko Haram in Nigeria

According to the Index report, Boko Haram is the deadliest terrorist group in the world (ahead of ISIS, the Taliban, and Al-Shabaab), having killed more than 7,000 people in terrorist attacks in Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger in 2014 alone.⁵ On a global scale, in 2014 northern Nigeria suffered 23 percent of all terrorism-related deaths worldwide.⁶ In recent months, as Boko Haram has been militarily degraded, it has changed tactics by dramatically increasing cross-border attacks by suicide bombers in Chad, Cameroon, and Niger. Boko Haram was formed by a Muslim leader, Mohammed Yusuf, who railed against government corruption and failure to adhere to the ideology of an Islamic state as a battle cry to recruit young followers, many of whom saw themselves as marginalized and victimized by the Nigerian government.⁷ Its first public manifestation was in the attack of a police station in Borno State in 2009.

Al-Shabaab in Somalia

In the Horn of Africa, Somalia faces an Al Qaeda-affiliated Islamic terrorist group, Al-Shabaab, which seeks to undermine any semblance of authority by the Somali government. Al-Shabaab

³ USAID. [Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism](#). February 2009.

⁴Institute for Economics and Peace. [Global Terrorism Index 2015: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism](#).

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷ Brookings's Institute. ['The disease is unbelief': Boko Haram's religious and political worldview](#). January 2016

emerged in 1991 after the collapse of the Somali state and protracted armed conflict among various ethnically-based factions. The group took advantage of the power vacuum and prevailing anarchy generated by the intra-Somali conflict to build camps and train fighters without fear of state interference. At its peak, Al-Shabaab recruited young marginalized Somalis by providing basic services to citizens in regions under its control.⁸ Despite suffering major setbacks and being pushed out of major cities, Al-Shabaab killed more people in terrorist attacks in 2014 than ever before -- more than 800 people were killed in close to 500 attacks, approximately double the number killed the previous year.⁹ Al-Shabaab continues to seek openings to commit terrorist acts outside of Somalia, as it has done in the past killing civilians in attacks in Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Dine, and Al Mourabitoun in Northern Mali

Despite the military defeat of Islamist militants by African and French troops (Operation Serval) in 2013, and the signing of a peace accord in Bamako in June 2015, northern Mali remains vulnerable to terrorist activity. Recent attacks on western hotels in Bamako and neighboring Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, underscore the new strategy of Ansar Dine and Al Mourabitoun, which now focus on attacking “soft targets” such as hotels, cafes, and supermarkets. Terrorists first gained strength in the region between 2010 and 2012 when extremists and criminal networks previously active in Algeria in the 1990s moved into ungoverned spaces in northern Mali and later capitalized on a separatist movement sparked by dissatisfaction with the performance of the central government in Bamako and allegations of extreme corruption and ineffectiveness in public service delivery.

Timeliness of Counterterrorism Partnerships

As African countries have faced these new security threats for which their militaries were ill-prepared, a variety of partnerships have emerged to assist national and sub-regional forces, with the United States playing a lead role. African countries have provided ground troops to fight terrorism in the Horn of Africa, Northern Nigeria and Northern Mali,¹⁰ and have relied on European nations and the United States for more sophisticated equipment and specialized training. The net result has been the degradation of the bulk of jihadist movements that now have only limited capacity to launch small scale, albeit deadly, attacks using in some cases, suicide bombers.

Unfortunately, in some cases, African governments that are counterterrorism partners are not the best performers on democracy and good governance, which is also one of the declared pillars of U.S. policy in Africa. In fact, a number of these countries are ranked as “not free” by

⁸ Center for Strategic & International Studies. “Al Shabaab.” AQAM Futures Project Case Study Series. July 2011

⁹ Institute for Economics and Peace. Global Terrorism Index 2015: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism.

¹⁰ French troops and a smaller contingent of other European forces (German and Dutch) are engaged as part of current UN operations in northern Mali.

Freedom House.¹¹ There is a growing perception, and many Africans are fearful that democracy and governance could be sidelined in pursuit of security, and that counterterrorism has become a pretext for undermining democratic values and practices. Africans that lived through the Cold War are beginning to see parallels today as governments that partner with the West to combat violent extremism may feel entitled to unconditional support regardless of their poor performance in other areas. A number of country examples illustrate the point.

- **Shrinking political space in some counter-terrorism partner countries** - In a number of countries some of the gains in civil and human rights of the 1990s are being eroded as political parties and civil society groups are denied political space for citizen engagement and participation or for their voices to be heard. In one notable example, while Chad has played an important role in fighting terrorism in the Lake Chad basin and in northern Mali, its poor track record on democratic governance, including recent allegations of extrajudicial killings of soldiers who voted against the president in the last election, should give the international community pause.¹²
- **Newly enacted antiterrorism laws stifle dissent for political purposes** - Ethiopia, for example, is a strong counterterrorism partner in the Horn, but continues to repress political rights, restrict speech, and arrest members of opposition parties.¹³ During legislative elections in 2015, the ruling party won all 547 seats in the lower house. The government uses broadly defined anti-terrorism laws to suppress critics, including nine journalists who were arrested in 2014 and several more who have been in detention since 2006. The Committee to Protect Journalists noted that the 10 journalists detained at the end of 2015 risk being tried under anti-terrorism laws.¹⁴ Furthermore, the government has violently suppressed peaceful protests in Oromia, home of Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, against a government development plan that would displace farmers. Security forces have reportedly killed over 200 people and arrested thousands, including prominent Oromo political leaders.¹⁵
- **Poor performance on constitutionalism and rule of law** - Burundi is now mired in a post-election crisis in which over 400 people have been killed and hundreds of thousands internally displaced or become refugees in neighboring countries. To many Burundians and other international analysts, the crisis emanates from the current government's recalcitrance in seeking another five year mandate despite the presidential term limitation of the 2005 Arusha accords. These Burundian democracy supporters believe that the country's poor track record on constitutionalism and human rights had been overlooked by counterterrorism partners because of the regime's troop contributions to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

¹¹ Freedom House. [Freedom in the World 2015](#).

¹² Convention Tchadienne Pour la Défense des Droits Humains. "Communiqué de Presse N°012/2016."

¹³ Freedom House. Freedom in the World 2016.

¹⁴ Committee to Protect Journalists. [2015 Prison Census](#).

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch. [Ethiopia: No Let Up in Crackdown on Protests](#). February 21, 2016.

- **Backsliding on elections and political rights** - Recently identified as a “key strategic partner” for its support for AMISOM,¹⁶ Uganda has declined in its recent Freedom House ratings from “partly free” to “not free” as a result of the government’s increased violations of civil rights.¹⁷ Unfair conditions leading up to this year’s national elections further eroded public confidence in the government, led by one of the longest serving African presidents.¹⁸

African democrats are increasingly fearful of a return to the Cold War paradigm through which a government’s involvement in combating terrorism overshadows the rights of citizens to a responsive and democratic state. Recent public opinion surveys by Afrobarometer show that while a very high percentage of Africans aspire to democracy – 70 percent of Africans preferring democracy to other forms of government -- fewer than half of those in countries surveyed are satisfied with how democracy is working in their country, a drop from previous years.¹⁹

Recommendations

How, therefore, can counterterrorism assistance better incorporate democracy building?

- Counterterrorism partners should design strategies that also integrate objectives to improve governance such as by encouraging more effective decentralization and voice at the local level in impacted communities and populations. Counterterrorism initiatives should take a holistic (all of government approach) that incorporates governance considerations from conceptualization through operationalization and consolidation.
- Host governments should be encouraged to not only defeat the negative forces militarily, but also to invest in rehabilitating communities and creating governance structures to tackle and eliminate the conditions that fostered the rise of support for extremism in order to guard against a relapse.
- Partners should increase assistance to nascent democracies with weak political institutions to develop functional, responsive governments that are able to deliver basic services to their citizens. Consolidation of democracy should be approached as a long-term process that requires consistent and continued support with mechanisms to reward or incentivize good behavior and penalize poor performance.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of State Bureau of African Affairs. “[U.S. Relations with Uganda. Fact Sheet.](#)” October 2, 2015.

¹⁷ Freedom House. [Freedom in the World 2015.](#)

¹⁸ State Department Press Statement. “[On the Results of Uganda’s Presidential Elections.](#)” February 20, 2016.

¹⁹ Afrobarometer. “[African democracy update: Satisfaction remains elusive for many](#)” September 16, 2015.

- Use public diplomacy and other mechanisms to state clearly and unambiguously expectations for democratic behavior across Africa, as development partners did so successfully in Nigeria in 2014/2015. Moreover, such statements, as recently done in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi, should be followed by concrete actions and long-term commitments to sustain support for democracy and good governance.
- Invest in education to guarantee peace and opportunities for this generation of youth. As argued eloquently in a recent New York Times op-ed by renowned journalist Nicholas Kristof, education can be more effective in combating militancy than military intervention.²⁰ Girls' education in particular can promote a virtuous cycle of development by increasing the formal labor force, boosting the economy and reducing demographic growth.

Conclusion

Poor governance is a driver of discontent and resentment of the state that can push citizens in transition environments to join or sympathize with extremist networks. To be successful in combatting violent extremism and preventing its reappearance or resurgence, counterterrorism efforts must also address root causes.

Given the high demand for democracy and good governance across Africa, the continent's partners have a critical role to play in helping sub-Saharan African countries address issues relating to terrorism in ways that are consistent with democratic principles. The international community has many tools at its disposal to continue to lead in this endeavor.

Despite the enthusiasm of a few years ago, and some remarkable accomplishments in the last two decades, democratic governance in Africa is under attack. On the one hand, it is challenged by external threats from extremist terrorist organizations and; on the other hand, in some cases, by internal threats from autocratic regimes that fail to deliver public services, combat corruption and protect rights and freedoms. The international community should do everything in its power to help rid the continent of both existential threats. Friends of Africa must make sure that they do not, willingly or inadvertently, allow themselves to become accomplices in denying Africans their basic rights and freedoms and a secure, prosperous future.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee.

²⁰ Nicholas Kristof. "[What's So Scary About Smart Girls?](#)" New York Times, May 10, 2016.