

Testimony of Ambassador Daniel Benjamin to the
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations' Subcommittee on African Affairs
**“Examining U.S. Counterterrorism Priorities,
Strategy Across Africa’s Sahel Region”**

November 17, 2009, 10:30am, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Room 419

Senator Feingold, ranking Member Senator Isakson, Members of the committee, thank you for the invitation to speak to you today about the Department’s role in countering terrorism in the Sahel region. Al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) continues to menace parts of the Maghreb and the Sahel. In the north, it is frustrated by Algeria’s effective counterterrorism operations, but in parts of the Sahel, it continues to operate with significant impunity. We are working bilaterally, regionally, and multilaterally, to develop their capacity to control their sovereign territory, effectively disrupt terrorist attacks, and counter those who advocate violence. A well-thought out, long-term approach provides the best opportunity to ensure our security and that of our friends and allies against the terrorist threats from this region.

AQIM has failed to meet its key objectives and, under pressure from Algerian security forces, is on the defensive in Algeria. AQIM is financially strapped, particularly in Algeria, and unable to reach its recruiting goals. In the Sahel, they are also having difficulties recruiting although the influx of Mauritanian recruits has meant that their manpower situation is not as critical as in the north.

AQIM has historically focused on Algerian targets in the northeastern portion of Algeria. After AQIM’s 2006 merger with al-Qa’ida, the group has continued to attack the Algerian government and military, while expanding its targeting of Western interests in the region. In December 2007, the group conducted sophisticated dual suicide bombings of both the Algerian Constitutional Council and U.N. Office buildings in Algiers.

Since then, however, the group’s fortunes have been ebbing. AQIM has been unable to conduct large-scale attacks since summer of 2008, in part due to pressure from Algerian forces, which have achieved important successes in breaking up extremist cells and disrupting operations. Increasingly, it appears that the Algerians have AQIM in northeastern part of the country increasingly contained and marginalized. Nonetheless, AQIM has continued to conduct low-level attacks in northeastern Algeria by carrying out ambushes, laying mines, and using small explosives, primarily against military checkpoints, gendarmes, police, and army vehicles. AQIM has also largely worn out its welcome in the Kabylie region,

where residents have become increasingly resentful of the group's presence. Although AQIM has never conducted attacks on U.S. diplomatic targets in Algeria, U.S. and Western business interests, particularly those linked to oil companies have been targeted in the past, and remain at risk.

One of the central questions about AQIM has long been whether it would be able to establish itself in Europe and carry out attacks there. There is no question but that we need to take this possibility very seriously, especially in light of past attacks carried out by predecessors to AQIM such as Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in France. Some of our closest counterterrorism partners in Europe have identified this possibility of infiltration as one of their foremost concerns. That said, we view the near-term likelihood of such an expansion of operations as less likely than it was just a few years ago. This, in large measure, is because of the pressure on the group in Algeria.

In the Sahel, the picture is different. AQIM maintains two separate groups of fighters in Northern Mali, and has recently increased attacks and kidnappings, including against Western targets. They rely to a considerable extent on hostage-taking for ransom while carrying out murders, and low-level attacks to garner media attention. In the last two years, AQIM in the Sahel has stepped up the pace: kidnapped two Austrian tourists along the Tunis-Algerian border in early 2008, two Canadian diplomats in Niger in December 2008, and four European tourists near the Mali/Niger border in January 2009. One of the Europeans, a British hostage, was subsequently murdered by AQIM.

AQIM has also increased other kinds of attacks in the Sahel, although their capabilities still compare poorly with earlier AQIM operations in Algeria. This year, AQIM killed a Malian official in northern Mali, killed an American NGO worker in neighboring Mauritania, and attempted a suicide bombing outside the French Embassy in Mauritania. In 2007, AQIM fighters killed four French tourists in Mauritania. AQIM in the recent past has attacked Mauritania and Malian security units with some success as well, killing 12 Mauritanian soldiers and beheading them in one instance and annihilating a Malian unit searching for AQIM elements after the murder of the British citizen.

Despite the uptick in violence, hostage-taking, and murder of individual Western citizens, we believe that these operations reveal some AQIM weaknesses. AQIM has failed to conduct attacks or operations in Morocco, Tunisia, or Libya. The Muslim population in the Sahel and Maghreb, as a whole, still rejects AQIM's

extremism. There are exceptions, however, such as the increase in AQIM recruitment of Mauritians, which is troubling.

In the future, we view AQIM as posing a persistent threat to western individuals in the Sahel, including our embassies and diplomats, as well as tourists, business-people, and humanitarian workers. I would like to emphasize, however, that AQIM represents less of a threat to stability in its region than do al-Qa'ida in the Federally Administered Territories in Pakistan or al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen. The group cannot seriously threaten governments or regional stability, nor is it poised to gain significant support among the region's population. AQIM cannot drive a wedge between the U.S. and its partners; it also cannot ignite an ethnic-based civil war as al-Qa'ida in Iraq nearly did.

If we play our cards right, we can further contain and marginalize AQIM's threat to U.S. interests, and the investments required are reasonable.

We are striving to build countries' capacity through long-term programs such as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP). We are also working closely with other key international partners to ensure that our collective efforts in the region are well-targeted, well-coordinated, and effective.

The Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) is a multi-year, multi-agency commitment designed to support partner efforts in the Sahel and the Maghreb to constrain and ultimately eliminate the ability of terrorist organizations to exploit the region. The program supports partner efforts to: build long-term capacity to defeat terrorist organizations and facilitation networks; disrupt efforts to recruit, train, and provision terrorists and extremists; counter efforts to establish safe havens for terrorist organizations; disrupt foreign fighter networks that may attempt to operate outside the region; address underlying causes of radicalization; and increase the capacity of moderate leaders to positively influence vulnerable populations. It also supports efforts to increase regional and sub-regional cooperation and interoperability, in such areas as communication and intelligence sharing.

Our quiet but solid support for their counterterrorism efforts has emboldened our partners in the region to stand up to extremism. We have been "leading from the side," if you will. These partners have shown the will to take on terrorists in the past. In 2003, for example, Mali, Niger, and Chad worked together to track down and arrest the extremist leader al-Para, who was infamous for taking 32 European hostages for ransom. In 2005, Algeria, Mauritania, and Mali conducted relatively

successful joint combat operations against the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC), the precursor group to AQIM, in northwestern Mali. The U.S. supported these operations from the background by providing information and logistics support. Our capacity building assistance has enabled Niger and Chad to take on anti-regime rebels successfully. Our support to military and law enforcement capacity building has led to stronger control of borders and remote spaces, and that continues to improve. Our programs for countering violent extremism – such as radio programming, messaging from moderate leaders, prison reform, and university linkages, such as connecting U.S. universities to the Algerian university in Constantine – have bolstered the region’s traditionally moderate inclinations.

We believe that our relatively modest efforts in the region are paying off and are therefore worthy of continuation. A steady, long term commitment to building effective security in the region will benefit the United States by enabling others to take the lead in stopping terrorists in their own countries – before they reach our borders. These countries have made it clear that they do not want the United States to take a more direct or visible operational role, but welcome assistance from the United States and other third-party countries.

The good news is that Algeria has been relatively successful against AQIM in northeastern Algeria. Despite its political turmoil, Mauritania has retained a strong interest in working with the U.S. on counterterrorism issues. Malian government efforts, including a brief period of stepped up military operations in mid-2009, have also helped to disrupt AQIM operations in the Sahel. We hope that our recent deliveries of trucks, communications gear, and non-lethal logistical supplies will reinforce an effort that suffered from physical/logistic incapacity issues. We are particularly pleased that our regional partners are working together to weaken AQIM, motivated in part by AQIM’s most recent atrocities. In August, Algeria hosted a conference for high level Defense Ministry representatives from Mali, Niger, Mauritania, and Algeria to coordinate anti-AQIM efforts. Mali plans to host a follow-up regional Heads of State Summit before the end of the year. That the region will take on AQIM is clear; we should make clear our commitment to enable them to succeed. We remain troubled by the extra-constitutional actions taken by President Tandja in Niger to stay in power and we have halted our assistance to that country for the time being.

We are also working with our European partners, whom we met with in Paris last month on this issue specifically, to coordinate assistance offered to our partners in the Sahel and Maghreb. At the Paris meeting, which included Stephane Gompertz and Olivier Chambard from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Charlotte

Montel from the Foreign Minister's Cabinet, as well as officials from the European Union, Great Britain, and Germany; discussions centered on cooperation in the future. Additionally, we have met with Canadian officials to discuss cooperation in the wake of the hostage taking of their diplomats. We share the opinion that the best way to bolster the regional will to defeat terrorism in the Trans Sahara will involve building the law enforcement and military capacity of our regional partners.

I should add that building capacity is not the only contribution that Western partners can make to defeating terrorism in the region. It is also imperative that we do what we can to remove the incentives for kidnapping for ransom. The key to will be for other countries to embrace a policy of no concessions to hostage takers. This administration plans to make broader acceptance of the no-concessions approach an important initiative. We have seen that, over time, kidnappers lose interest in nationals of countries that adhere to such a policy.

In closing, let me reiterate: we welcome the readiness of our partners in the region to take the lead in confronting AQIM, and we are pleased about the cooperation among our Western allies as we take effective steps to help build security in the Sahel. This cooperation, I strongly believe, will help fulfill the vision of working in partnership with other nations in troubled areas that has been a hallmark of President Obama's foreign policy. I also believe that as we continue to provide support, using the Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership as our primary tool, we will achieve our goal of reducing the danger AQIM poses to the region and U.S. interests.