

**Written Testimony by U.S. Agency for International Development
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U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on African Affairs**

**“Examining U.S. Counterterrorism Priorities and
Strategy across Africa’s Sahel Region”
November 17, 2009**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Isakson, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the role USAID is playing in the fight against terrorism in Africa’s Sahel region.

Terrorism is a challenge that has plagued U.S. Government work around the world. In Africa, especially in the Trans-Saharan region, our efforts to improve governance and create economic opportunity are increasingly threatened by the emerging forces of violent extremism. To counter the forces that would derail our progress toward development in this fragile region, USAID is working in concert with the Departments of Defense and State in the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP). USAID has been committed to TSCTP since its inception in 2005, working to define how development assistance can most effectively be used to contribute to long-term peace and stability.

Because of the dearth of information about extremism in Africa that existed when the Partnership began, USAID commissioned two studies: one to aggregate and supplement what is known about the drivers of extremism in Africa, and one to take those findings and apply them to programs that could address those drivers. These exhaustive, peer-reviewed studies have helped create the foundation on which we design our development programs.

The studies highlighted the complex nature of drivers that lead to extremism and showed that an overarching “root cause,” such as poverty, is often just one of many factors that contribute indirectly to radicalization in Africa. Socioeconomic drivers such as social exclusion and unmet economic needs often contribute to the threat of violent extremism. Politically, extremism can be driven by the denial of political rights and civil liberties, or endemic corruption and impunity for well-connected elites. And broader cultural threats—to traditions, values or cultural space—also are drivers that may need to be addressed. Our research shows that these drivers are neither static nor globally consistent, and they evolve over time.

A number of factors often work together to contribute to radicalization, and the full impact of one factor often depends on whether others factors are present at the same time. For instance, as noted in the study, someone who has been marginalized socially may only be radicalized if he also has the opportunity to form personal relationships and networks with violent extremists. A person who feels thoroughly estranged from mainstream society may drift into violent extremism

groups, not primarily because of his anger at being excluded, but because social alienation fuels the types of personal relationships and group dynamics that, in turn, facilitate the turn to violent extremism. Along similar lines, pervasive corruption undermines state capacity, and facilitates the emergence of “ungoverned,” “under-governed,” “misgoverned,” or “poorly governed” spaces, which, in turn, may provide opportunities for violent extremist groups. In addition, failed or failing states are create more space for local conflicts to flourish, which may then be co-opted or hijacked by transnational terrorist networks. These findings are critical to our policy and programming decisions and will inform what interventions will be the most effective toward preventing drivers from spiraling, how to monitor our progress, and how to integrate counter-terrorism concerns into our future efforts.

Combined with country assessments, these findings have led us to focus our work on maintaining low levels of violent extremist threat in Chad, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania by reducing the drivers we identified through activities that strengthen resiliencies and communicate messages among at-risk groups. USAID’s TSCTP approach has concentrated on youth empowerment, education, media, and good governance—the four areas where we see the greatest opportunity for local partnerships and progress. Each activity is tailored to meet the specific threat levels, political environments, and material needs of each country. Unlike traditional development programs, our counter-extremism efforts, when necessary, target narrow populations that generally aren’t reached by other programs. We also specifically reach out to young men—the group most likely to be recruited by extremist groups.

In Niger, we have been building the capacity of local leaders to launch and sustain community development projects. In Mali, the 11 community radio stations we’re building will reach 385,000 people with messages of peace-building, governance, and education. And in Chad, we are developing conflict mitigation and community stabilization projects that reach into the country’s remote north.

While it can be difficult to measure success in countering extremism, we have seen some progress in our efforts. As a result of our outreach in Chad, the Association of Nomads and Herders has created a youth branch of its organization, which has given those young men who participate greater stature in their community. The promotion of youth participation in organizations such as this one helps to build stronger ties between youth and their communities, and provides them with a voice in society. Empowering youth in this way can greatly reduce the feeling of marginalization that feeds recruitment into extremist groups.

In northern Mali, where one of the underlying drivers of extremism is the lack of educational opportunity, a USAID radio-based program has trained more than 1,400 teachers in 217 schools.

And in Niger, our early partnership with a local imam has directly resulted in more than a dozen *madrassas* adding a course on peace and tolerance to their curricula.

In the uranium-mining areas of northern Niger communities have formed listening clubs to discuss USAID-funded radio programs on good governance. One listening club even reports that they are pooling funds to purchase a phone card so that they can call the radio station with their feedback.

But despite the promise of these community-based efforts, national governance has seen a major setback in Niger. The recent referendum and sham elections have done more to empower the current anti-democratic regime than to provide a voice for the people, and we are concerned about the path the regime is taking. As a result, most development assistance has been frozen, and programs that work with local officials and provide skills training to young people are now on hold, though our work in media is ongoing.

Similarly, in Mauritania, our work was curtailed by the August 2008 coup d'état. However, with Mauritania's return to constitutional order following the signing of the Dakar Accord and July 2009 elections, we are again focusing on strengthening democracy and human rights.

The FY 2010 request for \$32 million in development assistance and economic support funds for TSCTP seeks to build on these programs through more robust programming reaching a greater number of people, particularly youth, and a possible scaling-up of activities to additional countries such as Burkina Faso, where we plan to conduct an assessment in the near future. This continued funding in the base budget will allow USAID to develop long-term staffing and procurement plans to ensure we continue to make progress countering extremism through strategic development programming.

For our programs to be successful, we must invest in strong local partnerships and our methods of engagement must be nimble and creative. Because trends in extremism are fluid, we must constantly reassess our priorities, our progress, and our policies to ensure that our work is based on the realities of today.

Toward this end, we are pleased with our strong and productive partnership with the Departments of Defense and State on the planning and implementation of TSCTP, as well as our work with other donors on coordinating efforts to counter extremism. Sustained engagement—within the U.S. Government, with other donor governments, and with our partners in the Trans-Saharan region—will be the key to combating extremism today and securing peace and stability for years to come.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Senator Isakson, and members of the Subcommittee for your continued support for USAID and our programs.