

COUNTERING TERRORISM IN NORTH AFRICA: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

HEARING

BEFORE THE

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ASIA, AND COUNTERTERRORISM

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COUNTERING TERRORISM IN NORTH AFRICA: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2026

U.S. SENATE,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NEAR EAST, SOUTH ASIA,
CENTRAL ASIA, AND COUNTERTERRORISM,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 3:05 p.m., in room SD-419, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. David McCormick, chairman of the subcommittee, presiding.

Present: Senators McCormick [presiding], Cruz, Scott, Rosen, Shaheen, Murphy, and Kaine.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. DAVE MCCORMICK, U.S. SENATOR FROM PENNSYLVANIA

Senator MCCORMICK. Good afternoon. This hearing will come to order. Thank you, Senator Rosen. Good to have you here, Senator Kaine.

The Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism will come to order.

I first want to thank our witnesses for being here today—we have got two great witnesses—and Senator Rosen, for her partnership and her idea. This hearing was her idea, and I think it is a good one.

As we continue our crucial work of counterterrorism oversight, this hearing represents an opportunity to analyze North Africa, a strategic region important to our national security interests. The five countries that make up this region—Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt—occupy positions of geostrategic significance that directly impact global commerce and Western security. They control key maritime chokepoints, serve as gateways between Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa, and sit within crucial energy corridors.

Libya alone shares borders with six nations and has become a transit hub for arms, fighters, and illicit trafficking that threatens the Mediterranean. Egypt controls the Suez Canal, through which 12 percent of global trade passes. Morocco, of course, guards the Straits of Gibraltar.

Political instability and governance challenges have created opportunities that terrorist organizations look to exploit. In the years following the cease-fire in Libya, the country's political fragmentation has contributed to internal instability and has prevented effective security coordination against shared threats. This fragmenta-

tion has allowed ISIS, Libya, and Al Qaeda to maintain logistical networks to some degree, though the threat has been greatly diminished when compared with the previous decade.

And in Egypt, one of the three U.S.-designated major, non-NATO allies in the region, terrorist groups like ISIS-Sinai have historically committed violence against government entities, Coptic Christians, and other civilian targets. Security gains have been made by joint counterterrorism efforts in recent years to reduce the threat and prevent mass attacks.

Last month, I was pleased to see the Treasury Department designate the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist Group. This designation unlocks additional tools to combat the illicit financial networks that have legitimized terrorism and spread the group's influence globally. I really want to applaud the administration's efforts to disrupt terror networks that undermine our national security.

Tunisia, another major non-NATO ally, has seen a significant reduction in Islamic militant violence since 2006, which demonstrates improvements in Tunisian security capacity. At the same time, we know that certain terrorist cells remain active in border regions, as evidenced by the recent death of a Tunisian police officer during a counterterrorism operation along the Algerian border.

Algeria represents both opportunity and challenge. While Algeria maintains warm relations with Russia and has divergent foreign policy positions on issues like Israel and Iran, counterterrorism remains an area of bilateral cooperation.

Lessons can be gleaned from our positive counterterrorism partnership with Morocco. As a major non-NATO ally since 2004, Morocco's comprehensive counterterrorism strategy, which successfully disrupted terrorist cells as recently as this year, combined enhanced security measures with multilateral coordination.

North Africa's security gains are evident in that region, and has not experienced a massive terrorist attack in almost a decade. While smaller incidents have occurred, the greatest threat North Africa currently faces is from spillover risk posed by Sahel-based groups. The Sahel region, including Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, has witnessed the rise of JNIM (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin), which has grown into one of Africa's most potent Islamic terrorist groups. JNIM evolved from Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, an organization with Algerian roots that originated from the Islamist insurgencies of the 1990's, which claimed thousands of lives, including three U.S. citizens that were killed in a 2013 attack on an Algerian gas plant.

It is my understanding that this committee will soon convene a hearing on the Sahel, and I look forward to continuing this conversation as it relates to those threats.

This hearing provides an opportunity to assess the progress made to counter threats and also better understand where we go from here. It has also been over two decades since the global war on terror started, and it is critical we learn from the failures, resist mission creep, while also leveraging strategic programming that bolsters regional security and involves our partners, our allies, paying their fair share.

The Trump administration has taken decisive action to reshape the U.S. approach to counterterrorism, eliminate wasteful spending, and streamline bureaucracy. As the Department of State realigns its efforts with the administration's goals, Congress stands ready to work together.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses and to working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to ensure the American taxpayer dollars are being spent effectively, that our personnel are positioned for success, and that we are doing everything necessary to protect the American people from terrorist threats emanating from North Africa and beyond.

I am now happy to recognize the ranking member of this committee, Senator Rosen, for her opening remarks.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JACKY ROSEN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM NEVADA**

Senator ROSEN. Well, thank you, Chairman McCormick, and thank you for you and your staff's cooperation in setting up the hearings that we have had and the good work that we are trying to do in this area. This hearing is extremely important, and I want to say thank you to the witnesses for joining us today as well.

Because today's hearing is focused on a region that frequently just does not get enough attention, North Africa, also known as the Maghreb. Strategically located between Europe and the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, the countries of North Africa are important to U.S. national, economic, and energy security. The region deserves a deeper look at the immense opportunities as well as the unique challenges it experiences.

While American attention has strayed from the region in recent decades, our Nation has a long history of engagement with North Africa, with Morocco having the longest diplomatic relations with the U.S. of any other country, now celebrating 250 years of friendship. I was proud to visit Rabat in 2023, when I led the first-ever bipartisan Senate delegation to the Abraham Accords countries, and I was struck by the Moroccan Government's commitment to working with us to counter terrorism in the region, something I believe we must strongly continue to invest in.

The current U.S. administration has demonstrated an interest in the Maghreb, prioritizing peace deals, regional stability, and trade and economic opportunities. Increased U.S. attention to the region is welcome, as China and Russia and Iran have significantly invested in North Africa for more than a decade, and they have succeeded in making critical inroads. This is not good.

For today's hearing we will be focused on the critical importance of counterterrorism efforts in the Maghreb. Since the height of ISIS, the region has experienced significant, steady decrease in violent terrorist attacks, in part thanks to U.S.-supported counterterrorism partnerships and countering violent extremist programs.

Specifically, the U.S.-support for the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership has played a critical role in helping countries improve their own capacities in addressing terrorist threats and preventing the spread of violent extremism. It is always at their door.

While we see immense progress, there continues to be the risk of terrorism across the Maghreb. Compounding this is the terrorist threat from the Sahel, which has become a global hotspot for terrorism in recent years. It is impossible—impossible now—to think of the Sahel and North Africa as completely different regions. They are increasingly connected through overlapping dynamics that we cannot ignore.

Violent extremists, they do not know any boundaries. They will take advantage of weak States, they will take advantage of porous borders, and this could risk the stability of North Africa, the relative stability they have enjoyed for many years.

So it is my hope that our witnesses will dive into the progress that has been achieved in the region and what U.S. efforts actually helped get us there, and what we need to do to keep sustaining this. Given the strategic importance of the Maghreb, it is imperative that we continue to support counterterrorism partnerships in this region, given what is happening in the Sahel.

At the same time, we must not be naïve that recruitment to terrorist organizations will, frankly, ever stop, particularly in light of our foreign assistance cuts and the loss of expertise at USAID and across the State Department. U.S.-supported CVE (Countering Violent Extremism) programs have complemented our CT efforts by preventing the next generation of extremists. So I hope that we will discuss what the U.S. plans to do not just to stop terrorism but to prevent it from emerging.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I look forward to discussing this topic today. Thank you.

Senator MCCORMICK. Thank you, Senator Rosen. And again, thanks for all the help getting this hearing up and running. I look forward to hearing from the insights of our witnesses from the State Department.

Mr. Robert Palladino is the Senior Bureau Official of Near Eastern Affairs at the U.S. State Department. He is a career member of the Senior Foreign Service with extensive experience addressing critical foreign policy and national security challenges across Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Thank you for being here.

And Lieutenant Colonel Joel Borkert serves as the Deputy Coordinator for the Bureau of Counterterrorism at the U.S. State Department, where he heads programs in military coordination. Prior to this role, he was Chief of Staff of the U.S. Agency for International Development, USAID, and he is also a retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel and a decorated combat veteran.

Thank you both for your willingness to serve our country and for your willingness to testify today.

I would like to remind our witnesses to try and keep your opening remarks to 5 minutes. Your submitted testimony will be entered into the record in full.

Mr. Palladino, why don't we start with you.

STATEMENT OF ROBERT J. PALLADINO, SENIOR BUREAU OFFICIAL, BUREAU OF NEAR EASTERN AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON, DC

Mr. PALLADINO. Good afternoon, Chairman McCormick, Ranking Member Rosen, and distinguished members of the subcommittee.

Thank you for the invitation to testify here today. It is an honor, and I look forward to discussing how our counterterrorism efforts in North Africa advance our broader U.S. interests in the region.

As the Senior Bureau Official for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, my team and I work closely with the Bureau of Counterterrorism to counter terrorist threats across North Africa and the Middle East. It is through this collaboration that we are able to advance the President's vision for the region.

First, NEA seeks to protect American citizens in the region by providing essential services that safeguard their personal well-being and commercial interests. Second, our diplomacy is focused on ensuring Middle Eastern conflicts and regional security threats do not threaten the United States directly. Third, we help counter destabilizing mass and illegal immigration by ensuring travel and migration consistent with U.S. law. And fourth, we support American businesses as they pursue opportunities for trade and profitable investment across the region.

Countering and preventing terrorist threats in North Africa ensures that we can protect Americans, promote peace, and secure opportunities for increased American prosperity. We work closely with the Bureau of Counterterrorism to achieve these broader administration goals. NEA works with CT and interagency partners to identify and counter terrorist threats abroad before they reach our shores, while disrupting and destroying terrorist operations that target Americans and U.S. economic interests in the region.

A key driver of NEA's work is to identify capable partners in the Middle East and North Africa and encourage them to take increased responsibility both for their own security and the security of their region. The United States is focusing resources on immediate threats to the U.S. homeland and emphasizing burden shifting to capable partners to address local and regional threats. In this light, we have refocused our CT relationship with North African countries, with them taking primary responsibility for regional CT.

In the 2010's, terrorism in North Africa represented a significant threat to the United States and our interests in the region. From Morocco to Egypt, terrorist attacks killed thousands, including Americans. In response, the United States invested heavily in improving the counterterrorism capacity of North African partner countries.

As a result of our efforts, many of these countries have significantly degraded foreign terrorist organizations operating in their territories.

As a reflection of the region's success in countering terrorist threats, we seek to encourage States such as Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia to become security exporters in the region. Morocco and Tunisia have benefited from multilateral military exercises such as Phoenix Express and African Lion, the largest joint military exercise on the continent, which the Moroccans and Tunisians have co-hosted for years. Major non-NATO allies, Morocco and Tunisia have leveraged our deep security partnerships toward training security personnel from across Sub-Saharan Africa, on their own dime.

Algeria's counterterrorism successes also make it a critical pillar of stability in the region.

As the United States shifts our priorities and resources to the Western Hemisphere and Indo-Pacific regions, as outlined in the President's National Security Strategy and the State Department's Agency Strategic Plan, we are counting on North African States to build on their successes and share their best practices with neighboring countries that are facing significant terrorist threats.

For decades, CT has been at the center of many of the bilateral relationships with North African countries. Thanks to our productive CT relationship with these countries, we have partners we can work with to advance a number of the President's initiatives. A clear example is our work to counter threats from the Muslim Brotherhood and its violent ideology. We also look to North African countries to provide critical support to ensuring terrorist activity in the Sahel does not spread west to the Gulf of Guinea or north to regain a foothold in North Africa, where it would present a more immediate threat to the United States and our interests.

In conclusion, with this committee's support, the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs intends to continue working with the Bureau of Counterterrorism and other bureaus across the State Department, as well as our interagency and regional partners, to counter terrorism, to protect the American people, to expand space for investment that will benefit the American people.

Thank you for your attention, thank you for your leadership on this topic, and I welcome your questions. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Palladino follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF ROBERT J. PALLADINO

Good afternoon, Chairman McCormick, Ranking Member Rosen, and distinguished members of this subcommittee. Thank you for your invitation to testify here today. It is an honor, and I look forward to discussing how our counterterrorism efforts in North Africa help us advance our broader interests across the region.

As the Senior Bureau Official for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA), I can attest that we work closely with the Bureau of Counterterrorism (CT) to counter terrorist threats across the Middle East and North Africa. It is through this collaboration that we are able to advance President Trump's vision for the region.

NEA seeks to protect American citizens in the region by providing essential services that safeguard their personal well-being and commercial interests. Our diplomacy is focused on ensuring Middle Eastern conflicts and regional security threats do not threaten the United States directly. We help counter destabilizing mass and illegal immigration by ensuring travel and migration consistent with U.S. law. And we support American businesses as they pursue opportunities for trade and profitable investment across the region.

Countering and preventing terrorist threats in North Africa ensures that we can protect Americans, promote peace, and secure opportunities for increased American prosperity. We work closely with CT to achieve these broader administration goals. NEA works with CT and interagency partners to identify and counter terrorist threats abroad before they reach our shores. Simultaneously we work together to disrupt and destroy terrorist operations that target our citizens and our economic interests in the region.

A key driver of NEA's work is to identify capable partners in the Middle East and North Africa and encourage them to take increased responsibility both for their own security and the security of their region. The United States is focusing resources on immediate threats to the U.S. homeland and emphasizing burden shifting to capable partners to address local and regional threats. In this light, we have refocused our CT relationship with North African countries, with them taking primary responsibility for regional CT.

In the 2010s, terrorism in North Africa represented a significant threat to the United States and our interests in the region. From Morocco to Egypt, terrorist at-

tacks killed thousands, including Americans. In response, the United States invested heavily in improving the CT capacity of North African partner countries. As a result of our efforts, many of these countries have significantly degraded Foreign Terrorist Organizations operating in their territories. For example, Tunisia has neutralized terrorist cells and prevented potential attacks, recently foiling a suspected terror plot at a market in western Tunisia and eliminating a wanted terrorist affiliated with ISIS. In 2023, when a member of the Tunisian National Guard opened fire at Africa's largest synagogue in Djerba, killing five, U.S.-trained Tunisian police officers neutralized the shooter within minutes, saving the lives of hundreds of visitors present.

As a reflection of the region's success in countering terrorist threats, we seek to encourage states such as Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia to become security exporters in the region. Morocco and Tunisia have benefitted from multilateral military exercises such as Phoenix Express and African Lion, the largest joint military exercise on the continent, which the Moroccans and Tunisians have co-hosted for years. Major non-NATO allies Morocco and Tunisia have leveraged our deep security partnerships towards training security personnel from across Sub-Saharan Africa, on their own dime. The United States is now successfully encouraging eastern and western Libyan leaders to integrate their security institutions to address shared terror threats. This year and for the first time, Libya will host a training location for AFRICOM's flagship special operations exercise, FLINTLOCK to enhance interoperability with partners on border security and counterterrorism operations.

Algeria's CT successes also make it a critical pillar of stability in the region. African leaders' recognition of Algeria's success in the CT field is reflected in their designation of the Algerian Head of State as the African Union's Champion for Preventing and Combating Terrorism since the role was established in 2017. As the United States shifts our priorities and resources to the Western Hemisphere and Indo-Pacific Regions, as outlined in the President's National Security Strategy and the State Department's Agency Strategic Plan, we are counting on North African states to build on their successes and share their best practices with neighboring countries that are facing significant terrorist threats.

For decades, CT has been at the center of many of the bilateral relationships with North African countries. Thanks to our productive CT relationship with these countries, we have partners we can work with to advance a number of the President's initiatives. A clear example is our work to counter threats from the Muslim Brotherhood and its violent ideology. Additionally, we are working with countries across the NEA region to counter ISIS in Syria, take responsibility for their nationals in northeast Syria displaced persons camps and detention facilities, and give the Syrian people a chance to succeed. We also look to North African countries to provide critical support to ensuring terrorist activity in the Sahel does not spread west to the Gulf of Guinea or north to regain a foothold in North Africa where it would present a more immediate threat to the United States and our interests.

In conclusion, with this committee's support, the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs intends to continue working with CT and other bureaus across the Department, as well as our interagency and regional partners, to counter terrorism in the region to protect the American people and expand space for investment opportunities that will benefit the American people.

Thank you for your attention and leadership on this topic. I welcome your questions.

Senator McCORMICK. Thank you.
Colonel.

STATEMENT OF LTC JOEL BORKERT, USA RET., DEPUTY COORDINATOR FOR PROGRAMS AND MILITARY COORDINATION, BUREAU OF COUNTERTERRORISM, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON, DC

Lieutenant Colonel BORKERT. Chairman McCormick, Ranking Member Rosen, and members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am extremely honored to testify before this subcommittee and to be joined by my colleague from the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs.

I appreciate the chance to discuss the evolving terrorism landscape in North Africa and how the Department's Bureau of

Counterterrorism is advancing this administration's security priorities.

Preventing terrorist attacks on the American homeland is this administration's No. 1 counterterrorism objective, full stop. Every program, every dollar, every partnership is measured by the standard, does it make America safer, stronger, and more prosperous?

Over the past year, guided by the principle of peace through strength, we have shifted from open-ended capacity building to targeted and decisive threat prevention. The Bureau of Counterterrorism plays a central role in shaping, implementing, and coordinating these efforts across the Department and the interagency.

Our focus is simple—disrupt terrorist networks, deter terrorist travel, and prevent threats overseas from becoming attacks on the U.S. soil. A core pillar of our strategy is strengthening frontline partners while shifting responsibility to those whose sovereignty and stability are directly at stake. Strong partners are force multipliers for American security.

Our assistance prioritizes border and traveler screenings, watchlisting, real-time information sharing, and counterterrorist financing, the tools that actually stop attacks before they reach our homeland.

While the territorial defeat of ISIS during the first Trump administration significantly degraded the group's capabilities, instability across the Middle East, Sub-Sahara Africa, and the Sahel continues to provide space for terrorist networks to operate. Weak borders, sparsely populated territories, and ongoing conflicts, including the activities of Iran's terrorist proxies, fuel radicalization and enable the free movement of fighters, weapons, and funds. In this environment, our approach is clear—prevent threats to the homeland forward, streamline our efforts, and require partners to carry their share of the fight.

North Africa demonstrates what focused U.S. leadership, combined with partner ownership, can achieve. Over the past decade, U.S. support has helped our partners dismantle terror cells and disrupt attack plots. Just last month, U.S.-trained Tunisian forces eliminated an ISIS-affiliated cell and conducted additional operations against terrorist networks. At the same time, Morocco, having benefited from U.S.-supported counterterrorism programs, is now exporting security by training Sub-Saharan gendarmeries using U.S.-provided curriculum. This is the model we are encouraging across the region—capable partners leading their own regional security.

Despite these successes, the threat persists. That is why the Bureau of Counterterrorism continues to focus relentlessly on three priorities. First, stopping terrorists before they reach our borders, by strengthening partner screening systems, expanding travel information sharing, and improving aviation and border security. Our work with Morocco, including an aviation security program that resulted in a perfect TSA assessment at Casablanca International Airport, demonstrates the effectiveness of this target approach.

Second, we use our counterterrorism designation authorities to cutoff resources in operational space for terrorist groups. A recent example of this is our designations of the Muslim Brotherhood

Chapters in Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt, which provide critical tools to disrupt terrorists' financing networks.

And third, we are advancing President Trump's maximum pressure campaign against Iran by coordinating sanctions, mobilizing international partners, and countering Iran's terrorist proxies across the region. And since 2019, 18 governments have taken action against Hezbollah as a direct result of these efforts.

At the end of the day, our counterterrorism strategy is simple—homeland security first, precision over permanence, and allies carrying their share of the burden. We will continue to focus resources on what works, eliminate ineffective programs, and partners with capable nations to prevent terrorist threats before they reach the United States.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Lieutenant Colonel Borkert follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF LIEUTENANT COLONEL JOEL BORKERT (USA RETIRED)

Chairman McCormick, Ranking Member Rosen, and members of the subcommittee, good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to speak today, alongside my colleague from the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs.

I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the current terrorism landscape in North Africa, its impact on U.S. national security, and how the Department's Bureau of Counterterrorism is advancing the Trump administration's security priorities. Our work includes supporting key diplomatic efforts and coordinating closely with partners across the Department and the broader interagency community.

The Trump administration remains firmly committed to preventing major attacks on our homeland. We've made significant progress in strengthening safety and security both here and abroad, guided by the principle of Peace through Strength.

The Bureau of Counterterrorism plays a central role in shaping, implementing, and coordinating the administration's counterterrorism efforts. We're deeply involved in interagency decisions and planning, and we work with international coalitions to address the evolving threat of transnational terrorism.

A big part of our mission is to help partner nations—especially those on the front lines—take effective action against shared terrorist threats. Our cooperation with these countries directly contributes to keeping Americans safe. We focus on holding state sponsors of terrorism accountable, securing our borders, and dismantling terrorist networks that threaten the United States.

Instability in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa continue to challenge our partners in North Africa. While the terrorist threat in the region has decreased since the defeat of ISIS's territorial caliphate during the first Trump administration, instability in the Middle East, Sub-Saharan, and West Africa has allowed ISIS and other groups to persist. Terrorist organizations exploit weak borders and the vast, sparsely populated areas of the Sahel to move fighters, weapons, and funds. Security challenges in places like Syria and Gaza, along with the ongoing activities of Iran's terrorist proxies, further fuel radicalization and instability in the region.

In this shifting environment, the Bureau of Counterterrorism remains focused on preventing these threats from reaching our homeland and on encouraging our partners and allies to take greater responsibility for their own security and that of their region.

With U.S. support, North African countries have made real progress against terrorism over the past decade. Our partners often credit our foreign assistance programs for helping them achieve major law enforcement successes. For example, just last week, on January 22, 2026, U.S.-trained Tunisian security forces dismantled an ISIS-affiliated cell in Kasserine [KAS-uh-reen], eliminating all four members. This followed another successful operation by the Tunisian Ministry of Interior, which resulted in the death of a member of the ISIS affiliate Jund al-Khilafa [JOOND al-khi-LAH-fah] and the arrest of two more suspects. Additionally, having benefitted from training funded by the Bureau of Counterterrorism, Morocco is now taking ownership of the counterterrorism threat. Utilizing U.S. Government-provided curriculum, provided through our programming with Diplomatic Security, the Moroccans are training Sub-Saharan gendarmeries. As CT programming decreases in North Africa and countries like Morocco work with their neighbors to address local-

ized threats, we are encouraging others in the region to follow Morocco's strong example.

Despite these successes, the threat remains. We support President Trump's unwavering commitment to protect Americans from terrorism—whether in North Africa or anywhere else these threats may arise. Here's how we do that:

First, we work to stop terrorists before they reach our borders. We help countries strengthen their visa systems, expand information sharing on travelers of concern, and improve border screening to detect and deter terrorist travel.

Last year, President Trump emphasized the importance of working with countries willing to improve information-sharing and identity management to address both terrorism and public safety risks. Through CT funded aviation security-focused programming, our Moroccan partners had a "perfect" TSA assessment of the Casablanca International Airport, which has multiple direct flights to the United States. CT will continue to engage our partners, providing targeted assistance to help them share information and screen travelers more effectively.

Second, our designation authorities allow us to cut off resources to dangerous terrorist groups. Recently, the U.S. Government designated three Muslim Brotherhood chapters in Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt as Foreign Terrorist Organizations or Specially Designated Global Terrorists. These designations give our federal partners new tools to counter terrorist activity and financing, constrain terrorist networks, and encourage behavior that advances U.S. national security interests.

Third, in line with President Trump's restoration of the Maximum Pressure Campaign on Iran, the Bureau is directing sanctions and other countermeasures, leading international initiatives, and mobilizing partners against the threat posed by Iran and its proxies. These efforts are making a difference. For example, the EU designated the IRGC as a terrorist organization last week. Paraguay became the first country in South America to designate the IRGC as a terrorist organization last year and expanded its designation of Hizballah. Since 2019, eighteen governments have taken action to ban, sanction, or restrict Hizballah, thanks to our efforts. We continue to work with North African countries to counter the threat from Iran and its proxies.

The Trump administration has made it clear that counterterrorism will remain a top priority to keep our homeland safe. We will continue to work in a focused and targeted way, alongside partners who share our commitment to countering terrorist threats. North Africa is home to many capable and increasingly self-reliant partners, and we will keep working with them to identify and neutralize threats to U.S. interests and our shared security.

Thank you again, Chairman McCormick and Ranking Member Rosen, for the opportunity to be here. I look forward to your questions.

Senator MCCORMICK. Thank you both for your testimony.

At this point we are going to do the question-and-answer section. I will start with 5 minutes of questions, then Senator Rosen, and then we will go back and forth. And we have a number of Senators that are going to be stopping by, so we may move things around a bit to make sure everybody gets to ask their questions.

So, I will start with you, Mr. Borkert. What is the current status of the State Department's CT programming in the region, and how does it align with the administration's approach to counterterrorism?

Lieutenant Colonel BORKERT. Yes, thank you for that question, Senator. Right now we have roughly about \$34 million of ongoing programs. They are primarily focused on aviation security, crisis response, border security, and counterterrorist funding. This is aligned with this administration as it really is focused on protecting the homeland first. So that is our No. 1 objective, and that is really what our programs that we are investing in currently aim to do.

Senator MCCORMICK. If you look at the partnerships, in particular those with Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt as examples, what are cases where this positive counterterrorism partnership has yielded real results? Can you point out some specific examples?

Lieutenant Colonel BORKERT. Yes, Senator, I can. Thank you for that question. I think when it comes to Morocco we see that they are becoming a net exporter of counterterrorist capability, particularly because of some of the training that they have been doing in the Sahel. If you look at Egypt, they have a Counterterrorism Training Center focused on counter-IEDs, and they have also been training African partners in order to be able to do that.

On Tunisia, the example I stated in my opening testimony, they have curriculum that they have been able to provide assistance again to African countries to their south.

Senator MCCORMICK. Thank you. And Mr. Palladino, in what ways has the CT programming helped preserve space and access for diplomacy in countries like Algeria and Tunisia during these periods of internal instability?

Mr. PALLADINO. Thank you, Senator. That is an important question. Finding areas on which we have common ground and finding areas in which we can cooperate together, despite other differences and views, is essential to advancing American interests. So the way we approach our diplomacy is done in a way in which we seek to emphasize what do we share in common and what goals are we trying to achieve together. Counterterrorism has proven to be extremely reliable in North Africa. It is something that we find eager partners willing to work with us. Thank you.

Senator MCCORMICK. And I want to ask a specific question about Egypt. Mr. Palladino, while Egypt has experienced a general decline in violent terrorist actions over the last decade, they still face numerous threats such as ISIS-Sinai, instability in Libya, conflict in Sudan. How is Egypt managing these threats, and how are we supporting those efforts?

Mr. PALLADINO. Thank you, Senator. Well, as you mentioned, they have largely defeated the ISIL Sinai Peninsula group, formerly known as ABM, as well as Harakat Sawa'd Misr and Al Qaeda affiliated groups. They, before we did, designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, and they welcome our designation as well as validation of their longtime determination that the Muslim Brotherhood promotes extremism and destabilization that threatens our security and sovereignty.

They have been strong partners in that regard. They have also built the Sahel and Sahara Counter-Terrorism Centre in Cairo. That is promoting and countering intelligence sharing. That has been effective by our estimation. And they are doing their part, as well, to take on more of the burden sharing necessary to combat terrorist in the Sahel. Thank you.

Senator MCCORMICK. Very good. Thank you.

Senator ROSEN.

Senator ROSEN. Thank you. I want to followup on your question here on the CT strategy in the Maghreb. To both Mr. Borkert and Mr. Palladino, it is my understanding that the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, this program is still being implemented in the Maghreb. But I have concerns about how it is being implemented, given the significant changes that have taken place at State over the past year.

So we will start with Mr. Palladino and go over to Mr. Borkert. Where does the TSCTP—that's a mouthful—now sit within the

State Department, and what bureau or office now serves as the lead implementer of the partnership and how do other bureaus and offices within the State Department coordinate to execute the program?

Whoever wants to go first is fine.

Lieutenant Colonel BORKERT. Senator, thank you for that question. I will need to go back specifically to dig deeper into the TSCTP specifically. You know, the CT bureau does lead when it comes to counterterrorism. We do have focus programs within that region that, again, are focusing on things like strong border screening, modern watchlisting, real-time information sharing, counterterrorist financing. Those are the efforts that we have focused our efforts on in the Maghreb.

Senator ROSEN. I will have my team reach out to get that information. Thank you.

Lieutenant Colonel BORKERT. Thank you.

Senator ROSEN. So we are going to move on to countering violent extremism. To Mr. Borkert, poverty and lack of opportunity are some of the biggest drivers of violence and extremism in North Africa and around the globe. Yet, as a senior political appointee at USAID you played a role in terminating programs that tried to address these challenges, including those focused on countering violent extremism.

At State we have seen the closure of the Bureau of Conflict Stabilization operation and layoffs in the CT, INL, and other bureaus and offices, as well as cancellation of public diplomacy programs proven to counter terrorist recruitment efforts. These types of vital programs, they target the root causes of extremism and prevent vulnerable populations from being recruited by terrorist organizations.

Mr. Borkert, are CT or any other aid bureaus currently implementing any CVE programming in the region, and if so, do you have staff with the requisite expertise not only to design the CVE programs but also to monitor and evaluate their implementation. And then, Mr. Palladino, if you have something to add after that.

Lieutenant Colonel BORKERT. Yes, thank you for that question, Senator. We did go through a reorganization, and we did close the CVE office. However, through the assessment process we have realized, or we have retained the capability to continue to monitor risk in that area, both when it comes to the counterterrorism risk, and then I would say some of the root drivers of that risk.

Senator ROSEN. So let me ask you this question then.

Lieutenant Colonel BORKERT. Yes.

Senator ROSEN. If you are closing that and you are just kind of monitoring, I have real concerns, serious concerns we are focused only on addressing current CT threats and not thinking about preventing future threats. We are not being proactive. So do you think your respective bureaus have a role to play in supporting these efforts to address socioeconomic, governance, and developmental challenges in the Maghreb and beyond in order to prevent emerging CT threats?

Lieutenant Colonel BORKERT. Yes. Our focus is on America First foreign assistance, as Secretary Rubio announced last year. So all of our foreign assistance and our security assistance is focused on

protecting the homeland. We believe, particularly in the area of North Africa, that it is important that our partners in the region take on more responsibility, particularly in this space.

Senator ROSEN. So do you think that we are not going to—if they know we are not watching the threats are still going to be there. So I think that you are taking your eye off the ball.

Mr. Palladino, do you have something to add here?

Mr. PALLADINO. I would just add that—thank you, Senator—I would add, you mentioned public diplomacy. We still maintain robust public diplomacy assets in North Africa that are active and are amplifying both U.S. messages and running the exchange programs. Those are operations that continue, and that we will continue to do.

Further, I would just add that my bureau and the Counterterrorism Bureau, we are meeting regularly and exchanging views and information, and the coordination is strong, and that is something that we will also continue to do. Thank you.

Senator ROSEN. Thank you. I yield.

Senator MCCORMICK. Thank you. All right with you, Senator Scott, to move to Senator Cruz?

Senator SCOTT OF FLORIDA. Yep.

Senator MCCORMICK. OK, Senator Cruz.

Senator SCOTT OF FLORIDA. Oh, did you want to go?

Senator MCCORMICK. I am sorry. He has a tight timeline.

Senator SCOTT OF FLORIDA. That is fine.

Senator MCCORMICK. Would that be OK with you? OK. Senator Cruz, go ahead.

Senator CRUZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate it, Senator Scott.

Mr. Palladino, thank you for being here and testifying this afternoon. I would like to ask you about the specifics of your testimony, and specifically two things you said in your written testimony back to back. You said that, quote, “Algeria’s counterterrorism successes also make it a critical pillar of stability in the region.” Then, in the very next paragraph, you said, again I am quoting, “We look to North African countries to provide critical support to ensuring terrorist activity in the Sahel does not spread.”

Now, I am assuming that that somewhat opaque reference to terrorist activity in the Sahel is about the Polisario Front, though you did not name the group. Iran is trying to turn the Polisario Front into the Houthis for West Africa, a proxy force capable of waging war, to threaten regional stability, and pressure U.S. partners whenever Iran wants leverage. The Polisario Front works with Iranian terrorist groups, it takes drones from the IRGC, it moves weapons and resources around the region, including to Jihadists, and much more.

I believe they should be designated as a terrorist group, and I have drafted a bill to do so if there is no change in their behavior.

Before getting to any other questions, is that what you meant by, quote, “terrorist activity in the Sahel”? Were you talking about the Polisario Front?

Mr. PALLADINO. It is an important question, Senator. Thank you. What I was referring to, well, what I would say in regards to the Polisario is President Trump has made clear his desire to achieve

a lasting resolution to the problem in the Western Sahara, to that dispute. And as part of that, American policy currently is we are engaging all parties, and we are going to continue to pursue that for a lasting resolution, and we seek that because if we can get to that resolution that is going to be our best shot at advancing peace and security, which will prevent further terrorist activity.

Now, you mentioned designation, Senator, and I would just add we are constantly assessing threats to the American homeland, and we have a process for that. It is something that we will continue to look at, and as the Secretary said, if we proceed that will be grounded in the process and the evidence and the law. Thank you, Senator.

Senator CRUZ. I see that the opacity I referenced was not accidental but was, in fact, deliberate, because in the full course of that answer there was no direct indication that, yes, the terrorist activity in the Sahel is coming from the Polisario Front, and that is a significant blind spot in our counterterrorism posture. Do you assess, right now, that the Polisario Front poses a threat to U.S. interests in any sense, and if so, in what sense?

Mr. PALLADINO. Senator, thank you, Senator. We are actively engaging all parties in the Western Sahara dispute in the interest of achieving a lasting and durable peace. That is the policy of the President. And we are seeking more time to continue to find a way to find common ground and to come to an agreement to stabilize the situation and allow there to be prosperity to follow, based upon stability.

Senator CRUZ. Well, I will say that answer was positively Shakespearean. It was full of sound and fury, and yet signifying nothing. And, by the way, I will say in terms of the President, I feel confident I have spent a lot more time with the President than you have, and he does not have any difficulty at all calling terrorists what they are.

Mr. Borkert, let's see if we do any better with you. Iran has trained fighters from the Polisario Front and Hezbollah has provided them with weapons. In your written testimony you said that your bureau is working with North African countries to counter the threat from Iran and its proxies, and you specifically talked about groups tied to the IRGC and Hezbollah. You, likewise, did not specifically mention the Polisario Front.

First of all, same question to you. When you talk about the threat posed to North African countries by Iran and its proxies, does that include the Polisario Front?

Lieutenant Colonel BORKERT. Senator, thank you for that question. We continue to monitor activities throughout North Africa. We continue to see if the IRGC and Hezbollah are, you know, their activities in that region and globally. And as we look at these activities we will work with our partner countries in order to counter those threats and, where possible, designate or encourage those countries to designate the IRGC, Hezbollah, and those terrorist groups.

Senator CRUZ. So I have to say, it seems to me you turned to your colleague and said, "Hold my beer."

Let me just ask a final question to both of you. Were both of you instructed in this testimony not to say anything negative about the Polisario Front, because it sure seems like you were.

Mr. PALLADINO. Senator, I am just trying to explain what we are trying to do, policy-wise.

Senator CRUZ. That is a yes-or-no question.

Mr. PALLADINO. No, I received no instructions to that effect, Senator.

Lieutenant Colonel BORKERT. Senator, I have received no instructions to those effects either.

Senator CRUZ. So you just decided to go down that road for the heck of it. OK. Thank you.

Senator MCCORMICK. Senator Shaheen.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Rosen, for holding this hearing, and Senator Murphy for giving me the opportunity to go ahead of him so I can get to another hearing. And thank you both for being here.

As you pointed out, and the questions have indicated, we face critical issues in North Africa, including terrorism threats. This committee has moved the President's nominees to Morocco and Tunisia, who are now serving in those roles as Ambassadors. However, three of the five North Africa posts remain vacant. What is worse, while the Senate confirmed those nominees, both male political nominees, the administration recalled the two female career Ambassadors to Algeria and Egypt. Maybe they thought that was DEI because they were women. I do not know. But they are career Ambassadors, like you, who have dedicated their careers to non-partisan service for our country.

So I fail to see how recalling experienced career Ambassadors, when there are not others ready to take their place, is in our interest. I think it is in America's interest to have confirmed Ambassadors in every country around the world, and right now we are falling behind China dramatically.

So can you both talk about the benefits of having confirmed Ambassadors in place to address serious issues like counterterrorism? Mr. Palladino, do you want to go first?

Mr. PALLADINO. Thank you, Senator. That is an important question, and we do want to have the administration's team on the field, and be fully represented. I appreciate the cooperation—

Senator SHAHEEN. I am sorry to interrupt, but do you not consider career ambassadors part of the President's team, no matter who the President is?

Mr. PALLADINO. Senator, you referenced some specific Ambassadors being recalled, and that is something that happens between administrations. And that is kind of the way the Foreign Service has worked often in the past. It is kind of the normal course of nature. And when that happens—

Senator SHAHEEN. Well, Mr. Palladino, that is just not correct. I have been here for 18 years now. I have been on this committee for almost 18 years, and I have seen Ambassadors come and go. And what I have seen is that career Ambassadors are generally left in place until they are replaced by another nominee or another career Ambassador. So don't tell me that that is the normal course of events, because I know it is not. And the fact is, when we do

not have confirmed Ambassadors on the ground, America's interests suffer. And I do not care how you can try and defend the fact that we do not have people on the ground, but we do not, and America's interests are suffering.

I want to move on, because Algeria has been an important U.S. counterterrorism partner. They have seemed to be willing to turn away from Russia and toward the United States, not only in economic ties but on military ties. But public reporting currently suggests that the Algerian Government has purchased Russian fighter aircraft, and it is in talks to purchase even more because it would take too long to get American planes delivered.

So can you speak—this may be for you, Mr. Borkert, but I am not sure. Maybe it is for you, Mr. Palladino. What is the administration's thinking on CAATSA sanctions if Algeria does order a number of planes from Russia?

Mr. PALLADINO. Thank you, Senator. We also have seen those media reports, and they are concerning. I would say that the Department of State is committed to upholding the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. And with transactions like those that you have described, they may trigger that determination. This is something that we will watch closely. And we could speak more offline, perhaps in a classified setting, in greater detail on the underlying content.

Senator SHAHEEN. Well, can we talk about what we might be able to do to disincentivize Russia-Algeria cooperation on military purchases like those planes?

Mr. PALLADINO. We work closely with the Government in Algeria on issues where we find common ground. We certainly do not agree on many things, and this would be an example where the United States would have a problem.

We approach the leadership and the governments as we find them, and we use the leverage that we have, often in private, diplomatically, to advance our interests and stop behavior which is not acceptable.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator MCCORMICK. Thank you. Senator Scott.

Senator SCOTT OF FLORIDA. I want to thank the Chairman and ranking member for this important hearing. I want to thank you for being here.

The United States is constantly facing threats from around the world that is evil. Extremist groups seek to destroy our way of life, such as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and in the West African provinces and across North Africa. These groups have evolved into cross-border terrorist networks, known for exploiting weak governance, ungoverned spaces, and security vacuums. Meanwhile, Russian-backed Wagner mercenaries are rapidly increasing their presence, and these terrorist groups are spreading south toward Coastal West Africa and north toward the Mediterranean, intersecting with migration smuggling routes that directly affect European and ultimately our security and economic interests.

For each of you, which of our partners in Europe and Africa have engaged in this issue, successfully delivered measurable security improvements, and earned the trust of local communities, and how

should we support these efforts, if you can talk about some of them. And if each of you would answer.

Lieutenant Colonel BORKERT. Yes, Senator. Thank you for that question. Sticking with our North African partners, I would highlight Morocco. They have been an excellent partner, I think, as we have discussed here. They are starting to export their capability to the countries of the Sahel, which we have concern about. And I think they have concern about, too, because that immediately impacts their region. I would also highlight Tunisia. Tunisia, based off the support that we have provided them, they have engaged and have been constructive partners in the Sahel.

And Algeria, of course, has always had a strong capability, and they do an excellent job of securing their border. And even in Libya, where there is some ungoverned space in the south, we have seen a lot of our programming being able to help them out. And both groups there have taken counterterrorism seriously and have done a good job of pushing most of the ISIS out of the main populated areas. And then, of course, Egypt has been a strong partner, and we have already highlighted what they have done with their Counterterrorism Training Center.

So I would say most of the countries across North Africa are an excellent example of what partner and burden shifting looks like, and we are appreciative of what they are doing.

Senator SCOTT OF FLORIDA. And so you did not address Europe. So you would say Europe is not doing anything?

Lieutenant Colonel BORKERT. Senator, I need to go back just to make sure. We are consistently engaging Europe. They have been constructive in the D-ISIS Coalition. But again, we consistently talk to our European partners.

Senator SCOTT OF FLORIDA. It sounds like they are partners. That is OK.

Lieutenant Colonel BORKERT. Thank you.

Senator SCOTT OF FLORIDA. Mr. Palladino.

Mr. PALLADINO. Thank you, Senator. I would concur with everything my colleague has said. Morocco is a major non-NATO ally, signatory of the Abraham Accords. Their counterterrorism capabilities, their training programs, their intelligence cooperation—

Senator SCOTT OF FLORIDA. Let me just interrupt. Has Europe done anything? Do you have anything you can say Europe has done?

Mr. PALLADINO [continuing]. What I would say is Italy, for example, is very involved in assisting and preventing illegal migration, and efforts that the United States is able to do in North Africa, that creates space for Italy to do more.

Senator SCOTT OF FLORIDA. Let me ask both of you, what would you say strategic success in counterterrorism in North Africa looks like over the next 3 years? What would success be?

Lieutenant Colonel BORKERT. Sir, I would say success over the next 3 years is we do not see a major attack emanating on the America homeland or our interests abroad. And then, more specifically to our programs, that we would see that most of the programs that we have there are successfully complete, that our partner nations can actually carry out those programs on their own, that the objectives that we had established to begin with are achieved, that

there is clear return on investment to the United States, and that these countries can continue to sustain the ability to conduct counterterrorism.

Senator SCOTT OF FLORIDA. I will just finish. I met today with the Ambassador that was let go in the Philippines. The Philippines is a strategic ally. She was a career, and she is a wonderful person. I think we really do have to put a lot of effort into making sure that we continue to support our relationship with the Philippines. I think it starts with we have got to really look at our tariff rate with them and see if it is appropriate, which when I looked at it, it did not seem very appropriate. But it is a strategic ally in that part of the world, and I hope we will put a lot of effort into it. Thanks, both of you.

Senator McCORMICK. Senator Murphy.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you to our witnesses.

Listen, my worry is that the underlying purpose of our policy in the Middle East today is not to counter terrorism, not to protect U.S. interests in the region, but to make the President rich. And I do think we need to talk about this today, because over the weekend it was revealed that a few days before the election the President of the United States struck a secret deal with the United Arab Emirates, companies controlled by senior officials in the United Arab Emirates, to buy a 47 percent stake in one of the companies owned by the Trump family and the Witkoff family, with payouts of at least \$187 million to the Trump family by the Emiratis, and at least \$30 million to the Witkoff family.

This is a stunning revelation. We have never, ever, seen anything like this before. And I want to understand to what degree the bureau is integrated or independent from this kind of corruption. It is corruption. That is what it is. So just a simple question, Mr. Palladino, were you aware? You were the director of, essentially, you are the acting director of the bureau. Were you aware that the United Arab Emirates had made this secret investment in the President's cryptocurrency company, or did you find out about it over the weekend like the rest of us?

Mr. PALLADINO. Senator, I was not aware, and any further information about that I would need to refer to the White House for a response.

Senator MURPHY. Out in the open, a few months ago, similarly, companies controlled by senior government officials in the UAE financed a \$2 billion investment in the cryptocurrency company Binance, with President Trump's crypto coin, almost overnight, making it one of the most valuable coins in the market. Were you aware of the negotiations happening between the Trump family and the UAE that led to that \$2 billion purchase using the President's crypto coin?

Mr. PALLADINO. Senator, I am focused on the personnel of the State Department and our deployment to the field and the policies that we are asking.

Senator MURPHY. Were you aware—but my question is specific. And listen, I know you are not carrying out this corruption. But were you aware of the talks regarding that investment, or involved in them in any way?

Mr. PALLADINO. Senator, I do not have any facts, one way or the other, regarding the premise of your question, other than things that are in the newspaper.

Senator MURPHY. These are just yes-or-no questions, just to get a sense of what your responsibilities are when it comes to your personal financial affairs. Yes or no, as a career member of the Senior Foreign Service overseeing our diplomatic engagement in the Middle East, is it permitted for you to use your public office for your own private gain?

Mr. PALLADINO. No.

Senator MURPHY. Are you prohibited by statute from taking official action that would have a direct and predictable effect on your financial interests?

Mr. PALLADINO. I am.

Senator MURPHY. You are. And your most recent posting was in Hungary. Yes or no, if you owned a private company in the United States would it be legal for that private company that you owned to accept investments from a Hungarian Government official?

Mr. PALLADINO. I don't believe so.

Senator MURPHY. That is the right answer. It would not be.

Why do we have these laws on the books that restrict you, as a senior member of the State Department, from intermingling your official actions with your private affairs? What is your understanding of the importance of those laws and restrictions?

Mr. PALLADINO. The laws and restrictions are passed by the U.S. Congress to ensure that those who are serving the Nation—have signed up to serve in the executive branch—are faithfully carrying out the United States Constitution and doing so in a way that serves the American people.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you for that straightforward answer. Obviously, it was stunning, to this committee and to the public, to find out that the President had accepted an investment from a foreign government that is directly intertwined with our fight against counterterrorism, and then to also find out that months later he had gifted that country with an exceptional transfer of sensitive chip technology was even more stunning.

We have these laws on the books for a reason, because we do not believe that you can carry out your duties on behalf of the American people if you are making money off of your position. And it stands to reason that it should matter to this committee, and to this subcommittee, that the President of the United States is not obeying the same ethical rules that you and your colleagues are subject to. I would hope that this would be a subject that the full committee would take up. It is just as important as the subject matter of this committee hearing.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator McCORMICK. Senator Rosen.

Senator ROSEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to build on, quickly, just make a statement, what Senator Scott said, and now Senator Murphy, because Mr. Borkert, you said earlier, we want to be clear that we are going to focus on return on investment to the U.S. in regards to counterterrorism. I would argue, based on both of my colleagues' comments and questions that our return on investment is not financial but protecting American lives.

I am going to move on now and talk about interconnectedness in the region. The Maghreb and the Sahel, increasingly connected by overlapping security dynamics. In Libya, the Islamic State once exerted territorial and governance control at a scale surpassed only by what it had achieved in Iraq and Syria. While public reporting indicates our presence in Libya has decreased, ISIS affiliates have established strong footholds throughout the Sahel, armed, in large part, with small arms trafficked through Libya.

While we must celebrate the CT successes we have had in North Africa, we cannot be naïve—again, think about protecting the homeland, you cannot leave holes in the fences for terrorists to run through. So we cannot be naïve that what is happening in the Sahel will stay there.

I know we do not have a representative from the Africa Bureau here today, but Mr. Palladino, how do you see NEA working with AF to develop a coordinated response to address extremism and instability that spans the Maghreb and the Sahel?

Mr. PALLADINO. Thank you, Senator. You mentioned, Libya, and Libya is within our purview. And I think you are right to point out that political fragmentation there does create the opportunity for increased risk that could pour out and pour from there. So for Libya we are very much focused on regularly speaking to leaders in both the east and west, and encouraging the Libyans to overcome divisions and to unify institutions and to focus on common interests in a way that is going to promote greater stability and greater peace. Those are the conditions that are going to create a more prosperous Libya and a Libya that is able to better police its own borders. So we are pleased at some of the progress that has been made, and, of course, there is much more work to be done.

Senator ROSEN. So then you would agree we should start thinking about CT threats in the Maghreb and Sahel in a more holistic manner. So, Mr. Borkert, what might that look like in practice, if we should and do think about these areas in a more holistic way?

Lieutenant Colonel BORKERT. Yes, Senator, thank you for that question. And I agree. I think we do need to look at these in a holistic way, and we do at the Department of State. I think one advantage for the Bureau of Counterterrorism, as a functional bureau, we discuss and talk a lot with all the regional bureaus. So my colleague right here, Mr. Palladino, we talk real closely with NEA, but at the same time we are in constant dialog with the Africa Bureau. I was in Nigeria with some Africa Bureau colleagues just a few weeks ago. I have routine conversations with the Africa Bureau, and we are looking at these from a holistic perspective.

One of the things that we are looking at in the Sahel is how do we have and maintain good situational understanding across that region? How do we work together in a more comprehensive way when it comes to information sharing with our regional partners, in order to understand those threats and to be able to combat any type of threat that might be emanating from the Sahel.

So I would say, again, from the Counterterrorism Bureau perspective, we are that linkage between NEA and AF, and I think we are doing a successful job of looking at it in a more strategic way.

Senator ROSEN. I have one last short question, but before that, just a yes or no. Would you agree that America First requires and actually demands us to pay strong attention and think forward, be forward thinking about the challenges ahead of us around the world, and that would be the best way that we protect the homeland?

Lieutenant Colonel BORKERT. Senator, yes, I would agree. America First policy does think strategically with the objective of the American homeland being protected first. And we do that around the globe by working with our partners to ensure that they are carrying their fair share.

Senator ROSEN. Let's hope so. My last question is about Tunisia backsliding. Senator Scott, again, talking about the region. Mr. Palladino, Tunisia's Government, under President Saied, is taking a concerning turn, to say the least, through consolidation and control over State institutions and significant human rights violations. At the same time, Tunisia, of course, is a reliable security partner in the fight against violent extremism.

Do you think Tunisia can continue to be a reliable security partner while Saied continues to crack down on the Tunisian people and what remains of Tunisia's democratic institutions?

Mr. PALLADINO. Thank you, Senator. For the President and for Secretary Rubio, we have been clear that U.S. foreign policy must be focused on making America safer, stronger, more prosperous. And that means we have to seek opportunities for greater burden sharing by our partners, for their own security. When dealing with Tunisia, this is the strategic approach that guides our interactions with Tunisia.

Now, our security assistance is not an endorsement of political decisions being made in that country, but it is a tool to protect American interests. What we find in Tunisia, there are things that we can work with. Like the Tunisian Armed Forces, they are professional, they are apolitical, and they are one of the most trusted institutions in Tunisia.

We have something to work with, and there is room for improvement, but at the same time we need to stay focused on core American interests and deal with the facts on the ground as we find them.

Senator ROSEN. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It has been a great hearing. I yield.

Senator MCCORMICK. Thank you, Senator Rosen. And we will conclude with a question for each of you, and then we will bring the hearing to an end.

Mr. Borkert, I will start with you. Thank you. Thank you, Senator. Thanks for putting this together.

Senator ROSEN. Thank you. I appreciate it.

Senator MCCORMICK. With ongoing counter-ISIS efforts in Syria and Iraq, what are you doing to ensure ISIS does not reconstitute somewhere else in the Sinai?

Lieutenant Colonel BORKERT. Senator, yes, thank you for that question. I would say when it comes to ensuring that it does not reconstitute, particularly in North Africa, we continue to diplomatically engage to ensure that there is strong sustainability of their CT programs, and we are consistently monitoring and assessing

the threat, and we are poised to rapidly and efficiently respond to risks to our interests in the region, as needed.

You know, I think there is obviously concern when it comes to the detainees that are in Northeast Syria, and we do have robust programs as we encourage countries across the Maghreb to take their detainees back, to ensure that they are prosecuted, and then also rehabilitated if they plan on, you know, if they need to be released. So I would point to those two things to show that we are poised in trying to prevent any type of ISIS resurgence across that region.

Senator MCCORMICK. Thank you. Mr. Palladino, does the U.S. believe Algeria's security cooperation with Russia enhances or undermines our regional efforts to combat ISIS and Al Qaeda affiliates?

Mr. PALLADINO. Senator, any time our partners are cooperating with strategic adversaries, that is something that we seek to dissuade them from doing. And whether it is China or Russia, these are things that we need to push back on vigorously, and we need to constantly work to find ways to protect the American people and ensure that our sovereignty is protected. And that is something we will continue to do. Thank you.

Senator MCCORMICK. Very good. Thank you. A sincere thank you to both of you for attending today and providing us with the benefit of your testimony.

For the information of members, the record will remain open until the close of business tomorrow, and for you as witnesses, we ask you to respond as promptly as possible to the questions you are asked, that you did not have answers to. Your responses will be made part of the record.

With the thanks of the committee, this hearing is now adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 4:10 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

Additional Material Submitted for the Record

RESPONSES TO ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD SUBMITTED
TO ROBERT J. PALLADINO BY SENATOR CORY A. BOOKER

Impact of Ambassadorial Vacancies on U.S. Objectives in Africa

During the hearing, Senator Shaheen highlighted concerns regarding the recall of career ambassadors from Africa and ambassadorial vacancies in key African nations, and their impact on achieving U.S. objectives in the region, including counterterrorism. I share these concerns.

Question. In countries without a confirmed U.S. ambassador, diplomatic influence can be limited, and the U.S. may not be fully “at the table” in high-level discussions. What steps has the administration taken, or plans to take over the next 12 months, to mitigate the impact of ambassadorial vacancies and sustain high-level engagement in North Africa?

Answer. The Department has full confidence in the leadership of our embassies abroad. We will continue to sustain high-level engagement across North Africa, both in Washington and in capitals overseas. In January, senior Department officials traveled to Algeria and Egypt, where they met with the leadership of both countries—including the respective presidents and foreign ministers—to advance the Department's objectives and strengthen the bilateral relationships. Through these engagements, we will continue to advance the administration's priorities in the region.

Prevention of ISIS Reconstitution in the Sinai

During the hearing, you shared that the State Department is engaging diplomatically with regional partners, monitoring ISIS—related activity, and taking action as needed to prevent ISIS from reconstituting in the Sinai.

Question. What specific diplomatic engagements is the State Department undertaking with regional partners to prevent ISIS from reconstituting in the Sinai?

Answer. The Department is engaging regional partners to monitor and degrade ISIS activity where it presents a threat to the U.S. homeland or our interests. Diplomatically, the Department engages partners in the region via United States participation in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. The United States also has strong diplomatic engagement with Egypt on counterterrorism, and the two countries are particularly focused on building upon Egypt's strong counterterrorism response to ISIL-Sinai Province. We have a shared interest in ensuring the group cannot expand and threaten to the United States. Finally, since ISIL-Sinai Province is a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, the Department will continue to leverage the tools at its disposal to target ISIL-Sinai Province's financial network to counter the group's terrorist activity.

Question. What mechanism does the State Department use to monitor ISIS-related activity in the Sinai, including coordination with U.S. interagency partners and regional governments?

Answer. The Department is constantly monitoring ISIS-related activity in the Sinai to identify and respond to threats the group poses to the United States and our interests abroad. The Department works closely with interagency partners to ensure the United States takes a whole-of-government approach to monitoring terrorist threats, including in the Sinai. The Department also works with Egypt and countries in the region to identify threats from ISIL-Sinai Province (formerly known as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, ABM), Harakat Sawa'd Misr (HASM), and al-Qa'ida-affiliated groups.

Question. What actions is the State Department taking in response to indications that ISIS is attempting to reconstitute in the Sinai?

Answer. The Department actively works with the interagency and regional partners, particularly Egypt, to respond to terrorist threats in the Sinai. Egypt's counterterrorism forces have significantly degraded ISIL-Sinai Province's operational capacity, and the Department supports Egypt's efforts to ensure the group does not regain a foothold in the Sinai. The Department will continue to use the counterterrorism tools at its disposal to respond to any threats from ISIL-Sinai Province. For example, the Department has an active counter-improvised explosive device (C-IED) and border security program with Egypt. The program will ensure that Egypt is prepared to efficiently respond to terrorist threats and ensure its security, including in the Sinai.

Question. What targeted actions is the administration taking, or prepared to take, to mitigate the strategic impact of Algeria's expanding security cooperation with Russia, particularly as it relates to counterterrorism?

Answer. The United States and Algeria have a standing counterterrorism relationship. Current U.S. counterterrorism assistance is focused on countering terrorist financing and ensuring Algeria can meet the Financial Action Task Force's benchmarks on countering money laundering and countering terrorist financing. Additionally, the United States and Algeria are continuously working to improve information sharing to identify and neutralize terrorist threats. Algeria's counterterrorism apparatus remains formidable. The United States will sustain senior-level engagement to facilitate deepening defense cooperation while encouraging Algeria's diversification away from Russian military systems.

RESPONSES TO ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD SUBMITTED
TO LTC JOEL BORKERT, USA RET., BY SENATOR CORY A. BOOKER

Question. How does the administration assess the overall effectiveness of U.S. counterterrorism cooperation with Morocco in advancing U.S. security objectives?

Answer. The administration assesses U.S. counterterrorism cooperation with Morocco as highly effective in advancing U.S. security objectives. Morocco is one of our most capable counterterrorism partners in Africa and the NEA region whose efforts have helped thwart attacks on American soil and curb ISIS-aligned terrorist groups. Morocco is a Major Non-NATO Ally that occupies an important geopolitical position

at the crossroads of North Africa and Europe. Our partnership encompasses nearly every U.S. security interest in the region and remains critical to advancing our shared priorities. This collaboration exemplifies the kind of focused, results-driven cooperation that makes America safer.

Question. What are Morocco's primary counterterrorism contributions that directly support U.S. security interests?

Answer. Morocco has disrupted terrorist cells and activity within its borders over the past year and has supported U.S. security interests in the region by training upwards of 2,500 sub-Saharan military students annually and over 5,900 moderate religious officials since 2015 in addition to contributing 1,488 peacekeepers to U.N. missions. Morocco is a member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and serves as an effective interlocutor with Sahel countries where the U.S. does not maintain a security presence. Morocco's willingness to assume greater regional responsibility demonstrates the kind of burden-sharing this administration prioritizes—collaborators stepping up to stabilize their own neighborhoods while advancing shared security objectives.

Question. What specific challenges, if any, limit the effectiveness of U.S.-Morocco counterterrorism cooperation?

Answer. The United States and Morocco enjoy a robust counterterrorism partnership. Continued terrorist activity in the Sahel presents a challenge to the region. The United States continues to monitor threats emanating from the Sahel and will review what cooperation is needed with Morocco.

Question. What specific U.S. counterterrorism-related activities or assistance to Morocco are planned for the next 1 to 2 years?

Answer. CT continues to conduct programming focused on enhancing Morocco's aviation security in close coordination with other foreign assistance bureaus and agencies. The aviation security program works to enhance security at Casablanca airport, which has several direct flights to the United States. Additional planned activities focus on sustaining Morocco's training programs for sub-Saharan military students and religious officials, supporting Morocco's continued participation in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, and encouraging Morocco's repatriation of their nationals from northeast Syria and Iraq. These targeted programs reflect our streamlined approach: supporting efforts that actually prevents attacks and strengthens partner skills to address threats before they reach American shores.

Question. How does the administration assess the overall effectiveness of U.S. counterterrorism cooperation with Tunisia in advancing U.S. security objectives?

Answer. U.S. security assistance has trained, equipped, and built the skills of Tunisia's defense, police, and judicial apparatus to successfully degrade terrorist threats before they reach U.S. borders. U.S. support to Tunisia has already paid dividends, with U.S.-trained units protecting U.S. personnel and religious minorities on numerous occasions, as well as increasing our information sharing on counterterrorism issues. This collaboration demonstrates measurable returns on strategic allocation—the kind of effective cooperation that advances homeland security.

Question. What are Tunisia's primary counterterrorism contributions that directly support U.S. security interests?

Answer. Tunisia has assumed greater burden sharing as a regional security exporter, providing free U.S. doctrine-inspired training to over 400 sub-Saharan African military personnel in 2025 and sharing counterterrorism best practices regionally through their own International Incident Debrief Conference. The Tunisian Air Force completes missions from the Air Tasking Order on our behalf for 45 percent of U.S. costs. Tunisia has improved intelligence-sharing mechanisms to identify and neutralize terrorist cells around the world. Tunisia exemplifies the shift this administration is driving: countries taking ownership of regional security challenges and sharing the burden of counterterrorism operations, which reduces risk to American lives and resources.

Question. What specific challenges, if any, limit the effectiveness of U.S. Tunisia counterterrorism cooperation?

Answer. The primary challenge facing U.S.-Tunisia counterterrorism efforts remains residual terrorist elements that linger in the country, despite significant progress. In early 2026, Tunisian security forces conducted a pre-emptive counterterrorism operation in Kasserine (the Feriana operation), foiling a suspected terror plot and neutralizing wanted terrorist Seddik Laabidi, a member of an ISIS affiliate. These incidents indicate that Tunisia's counterterrorism effectiveness has improved.

Question. What specific U.S. counterterrorism-related activities or assistance to Tunisia are planned for the next 1 to 2 years?

Answer. Ongoing activities are expected to continue, including assistance for Tunisia's police apparatus related to crisis response, encouraging Tunisia's repatriation of their nationals from northeast Syria and Iraq, and information sharing. The Department also continues to support Tunisia's regional training programs for sub-Saharan African military personnel. Tunisia's proven track record—including successful responses to the 2023 terrorist prison break, 2024 Tunis Grand Synagogue threat, and 2026 Feriana operation—highlights the impact of U.S. support for Tunisia's counterterrorism capabilities and demonstrates its position as a regional security exporter. This represents the kind of sustainable, collaborator-led security that protects American interests without open-ended commitments.

Question. How does the administration assess the overall effectiveness of U.S. counterterrorism cooperation with Algeria in advancing U.S. security objectives?

Answer. The administration assesses U.S.-Algeria counterterrorism cooperation as effective in advancing U.S. security objectives, particularly given Algeria's formidable counterterrorism capabilities. Algeria's counterterrorism apparatus is effective and continues to identify and disrupt terrorist threats. Algeria has worked hand-in-hand with the United States to counter terrorist activity and is currently cooperating with the U.S. to combat terrorist financing.

Question. What are Algeria's primary counterterrorism contributions that directly support U.S. security interests?

Answer. Algeria provides several key contributions that directly support U.S. security interests. Algeria built its counterterrorism capabilities during its own fight against terror organizations throughout the 1990s and now serves as a counterterrorism model, holding counterterrorism conferences to share its expertise with African partners and hosting the African Union Counterterrorism Center. Algeria also works with the United States to share information to identify terrorist threats and counter terrorist financing. These contributions demonstrate Algeria's role as a regional leader in counterterrorism skills building and knowledge sharing, which supports broader U.S. objectives of strengthening partner nation capabilities to address terrorist threats.

Question. What specific challenges, if any, limit the effectiveness of U.S.-Algeria counterterrorism cooperation?

Answer. The United States and Algeria enjoy a robust counterterrorism relationship. Although Algeria has a historic reliance on Russian military equipment, our security cooperation relationship has made considerable strides in the past year. Algeria's counterterrorism apparatus remains the most formidable in the region.

Question. What specific U.S. counterterrorism-related activities or assistance to Algeria are planned for the next 1 to 2 years?

Answer. U.S. counterterrorism-related foreign assistance is focused on countering terrorist financing and ensuring Algeria can meet the Financial Action Task Force's recommendations to counter money laundering and terrorist financing. Additionally, the United States and Algeria are continuously working to improve information sharing to identify and neutralize terrorist threats. Moreover, the United States will continue to encourage Algeria to repatriate its nationals from northeast Syria and Iraq. This targeted approach—focusing on countering the financing of terrorism and information sharing—reflects our commitment to disrupting terrorist operations and preventing attacks.

Question. How does the administration assess the overall effectiveness of U.S. counterterrorism cooperation with Libya in advancing U.S. security objectives?

Answer. U.S.-Libya counterterrorism cooperation has countered ISIS-Libya and other terrorist groups in Libya. Both the Government of National Unity (GNU) and the Libyan National Army (LNA) recognize the threat terrorism poses and are taking concrete steps to coordinate on border security and counterterrorism operations. U.S. counterterrorism cooperation with Libya is significant, though there is room for improving information sharing and interoperability.

Question. What are Libya's primary counterterrorism contributions that directly support U.S. security interests?

Answer. Over the last decade and in close partnership with the United States, Libya has successfully degraded ISIS-Libya to a point where the terrorist group currently controls no territory in Libya and is largely confined to Libya's southern border. ISIS-Libya is a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), and

Libya's commitment to neutralizing ISIS-Libya and increasing information sharing promotes U.S. security objectives and safeguards U.S. interests. The degradation of ISIS-Libya demonstrates what focused counterterrorism cooperation can achieve: denying terrorists safe haven and preventing them from using ungoverned spaces to plan attacks against the homeland.

Question. What specific challenges, if any, limit the effectiveness of U.S.-Libya counterterrorism cooperation?

Answer. Libya's political and security fragmentation are the primary factors limiting more effective U.S.-Libya counterterrorism cooperation. Additionally, both the GNU and LNA struggle to exert control and counter terrorist activity in remote areas of Libya, especially along the southern border, creating a permissive environment that terrorists actively seek to take advantage of.

Question. What specific U.S. counterterrorism-related activities or assistance to Libya are planned for the next 1 to 2 years?

Answer. The Department supports ongoing programming to improve Libya's counterterrorism skills in border security, aviation security, and soft target protection. U.S. engagement is focused on addressing the challenges posed by southern Libya's vast open spaces, increasing counterterrorism cooperation between the GNU and LNA and their regional partners, and improving information sharing with U.S. law enforcement agencies on border security and counterterrorism operations to prevent ISIS-Libya from reconstituting. Our approach prioritizes border screening, watch-listing, and information sharing—tools that directly prevent terrorist travel and protect the American homeland.

Question. How does the administration assess the overall effectiveness of U.S. counterterrorism cooperation with Egypt in advancing U.S. security objectives?

Answer. The United States and Egypt cooperate effectively on counterterrorism issues to advance U.S. security priorities. Egypt has largely defeated ISIS-Sinai Province (formerly known as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, ABM), Harakat Sawa'd Misr (HASM), and al-Qa'ida-affiliated groups. The United States and Egypt have also worked closely to counter threats posed by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Critically, the United States and Egypt work closely to advance President Trump's peace plan for Gaza and counter Hamas.

Question. What are Egypt's primary counterterrorism contributions that directly support U.S. security interests?

Answer. Egypt is committed to countering transnational terrorism in the Sahel-Sahara region and in 2021 inaugurated the Sahel and Sahara Counter-terrorism Centre in Cairo, which aims to promote counterterrorism intelligence sharing. Egypt's successful operations against ISIS-Sinai Province and HASM demonstrate its capability to address terrorist threats that could destabilize the region and threaten U.S. interests. Egypt's regional leadership—including hosting the Sahel and Sahara Counter-terrorism Centre—exemplifies the kind of burden-sharing this administration prioritizes, with capable collaborators taking responsibility for stabilizing their neighborhoods and preventing terrorist expansion that could ultimately threaten the homeland.

Question. What specific challenges, if any, limit the effectiveness of U.S.-Egypt counterterrorism cooperation?

Answer. Key challenges facing U.S.-Egyptian counterterrorism efforts are various conflicts and instability in the region, which divide counterterrorism resources. Terrorist expansion in Africa, Iranian terrorist activity and its destabilizing behavior in the region, conflict in Sudan, and the situation in Libya divide counterterrorism resources and present challenges for deeper U.S.-Egyptian counterterrorism cooperation.

Question. What specific U.S. counterterrorism-related activities or assistance to Egypt are planned for the next 1 to 2 years?

Answer. The administration encourages allies, including Egypt, to make concrete commitments to defeating our shared threat from terrorism, including greater burden-sharing and burden-shifting in the Sahel. Continued support for Egypt's Sahel and Sahara Counter-terrorism Centre in Cairo for counterterrorism intelligence sharing is also anticipated, along with the establishment of a regional aviation security center of excellence. The United States will continue to encourage Egypt to repatriate its nationals from northeast Syria and Iraq. Ongoing Leahy vetting processes will also continue to ensure U.S. security assistance complies with applicable U.S. laws regarding human rights. These efforts reflect our streamlined approach: supporting regional centers of excellence that amplify impact, strengthening aviation security that protects direct routes to America, and ensuring real-time intelligence sharing that enables us to disrupt threats before they materialize.

