

The Threat of Violent Extremism to Coastal States

Ghana's Exposure to Violent Extremism



Ghana



Photo Credit: Politico.

Violent Extremism is descending towards coastal states from the Sahel.

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Ghana for a long time has remained a stable country in the midst of increasing extremist violence and political instability in West Africa. But that narrative may no longer remain valid soon if adequate measures are not put in place to tackle the increasing threats from the Sahel. The threat of terrorism is increasingly descending from the Sahel towards Coastal States. Today more than 53% of all ECOWAS states are experiencing insurgencies. The pervasive spill over phenomenon makes Ghana’s border regions a key area of concern.

Recent attacks in Benin, Togo and Ivory Coast highlight the determination of the terrorists to expand beyond landlocked Sahelian countries, where the insurgency has devastated thousands of lives and property in the last decade. Ghana has a big number of prolonged unresolved chieftaincy and ethnic conflicts and tensions particularly in the Northern regions. The inherently high exploitative capacity of extremists imply that these vulnerabilities put Ghana in danger of terrorist exploitation. This paper examines the extent of Ghana’s exposure to violent extremism, the underpinning factors as well as national level efforts against the threat.

Ghana’s Exposure to Violent Extremism

Ghana has managed so far to stay safe from terrorist attacks on home soil. Yet Ghana has been so close to terrorism. Already, more than 13 Ghanaians are believed to have travelled to fight¹ with terrorist groups since 2015. Up to twenty three (23) others have been dissuaded from leaving to join extremist groups². Ghana’s first recorded case was Nazir Alema Nortey³, a young university graduate, who shockingly left the country in august 2015 to join ISIS before sending a message back to his parents to announce his new found cause. He was killed in Syria by April 2016. Professor Kofi Awoonor, a renowned Ghanaian poet and academic, was killed in the West Gate Mall attack in Nairobi, Kenya when Al Shabab fighters besieged the mall in 2013.

The threat has been menacingly and quickly

states⁴ are grappling with terrorist violence. The

Country	Ghana
Population	30 million
Terrorist Attacks	No attack on home soil.
Description	Coastal State, West Africa. Vulnerable.
Nature of attacks	No attack within Ghana yet. Ghanaians have been found to have joined ISIS and other groups. Fears of a spill over from Burkina Faso.
Vulnerability	Ethnic and chieftaincy conflicts, land disputes, grievances of marginalized groups (Fulbe), youth unemployment.

spread, occurring through a spill over phenomenon, has ravaged the Northern borders of not only Burkina Faso but also of Ivory Coast, Benin and Togo recently. With all its direct neighbors under attacks, Ghana has

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descending from the Sahel towards Coastal States in the last five years. Even though the fatality numbers are presently down from the peak of over 7,200 in the region in 2014, the threat has increased in complexity and geographical spread. Today 53% of all ECOWAS

now been encircled by the threat. These developments are dangerous for Ghana. Ghana’s proximity to these countries (Burkina Faso to the North, Benin and Togo to the East and Ivory Coast to the West) exposes the country to extremist recruitment or attacks or both. The unending Bawku chieftaincy conflict, the ethnic tensions in Northern Ghana and the unresolved challenge of Western Togoland separatists in the Eastern border regions amplify the risks.

¹ [Ghanaian Graduate Among 10 Suspected To Have Joined ISIS | Sahara Reporters](#)

² [Ghanaian civil society group stops 20 from joining ISIS - Africa Feeds](#)

³ [Two Ghanaians join ISIS -National Security Co-ordinator confirms - Graphic Online](#)

⁴ Mali, Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, Togo, Benin, Ivory Coast.

Extremists have a huge exploitative capacity. Ghana has over 352 unresolved chieftaincy conflicts. The protracted chieftaincy and ethnic conflicts in the border regions constitute a direct threat and opportunity for extremist exploitation. The Global Terrorism Index reports (2019 and 2020) indicates that up to 97% (2020) of all terrorism fatalities occurred in countries already in conflict. The opportunistic and exploitative capacity allows extremists to exploit vulnerabilities such as the above and enable them to eventually launch successful attacks in new and vulnerable territories hitherto unknown to terrorism.

“But the overall effectiveness of Ghana’s response will be determined by the State’s willingness to recognise that the battle against terrorism and the drivers that underpin it cannot be won on the battlefield alone”.

Just like in Northern Burkina Faso, in the North Eastern part of Ghana including areas such as Bawku, Saboba, Chereponi, Gushiegu and Karaga, there are significant governance deficits. Bad and unmotorable roads, lack of drinking water, inadequate healthcare and educational facilities and high youth unemployment render especially youth very vulnerable.

The impact of climate change is manifesting in the depleting vegetative cover, and change in rainfall patterns and water bodies. These deepen the competition over resources between pastoralists and the local farming communities. Scarcity and acute increase in food prices coupled with existing inter-ethnic tensions increase the risks for conflicts in these areas. These make border regions of Northern Ghana vulnerable and possible target for extremist exploitation.

Indeed Ghana has been more exposed to terrorism than acknowledged. A recent UN report released in February 2022, revealed the involvement of at least one Ghanaian in a 30 ISIL-Libya group of fighters arrested in Libya⁵. Earlier, the African Union Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) in Algiers, Algeria, in a 2017 report announced that up to 6,000 Africans⁶ who fought with ISIS in Syria and Iraq had returned home following the collapse of the so-

called Caliphate. Following this report, Ghana’s Parliament revealed that at least 100 other Ghanaian migrants may have joined the Islamic State in Libya⁷. Some of these individuals were believed to be migrants who may have been caught up in the conflict in Libya prior to the collapse of Gadhafi’s regime in 2011. The involvement of Ghanaians is believed to have been under-estimated given the porosity of the borders and the irregular nature of migration on the continent.

In the aftermath of the Libyan crisis and at the onslaught of the Sahelian instability, many analysts warned that the entire Sahelian region including coastal states like Ghana were at risk without adequate buffer. These concerns were valid and plausible given the widespread vulnerabilities in the region.

These predictions did not wait for too long. Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast soon fell to extremist attacks. The first attacks in both countries in January 2016 and March 2016 respectively presaged the form the threat would take in the region in the years to come. Soon after targeting state security, extremists began to weaponize the grievances of local populations in new territories. And Burkina Faso sank deeper. Today, Benin and Togo and to a large extent Ghana are on the cusp of such eventuality.

Beyond the external sources, there are internal dynamics that constitute major vulnerabilities. In June 2021 Abu Dujana, a Ghanaian suicide bomber with JNIM detonated a suicide bomb at a French Reconnaissance camp in Mali. It was carried out near a French military camp in Gossi, Central Mali under the directions of Jamaa’at Nusrat-ul Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM). He detonated the bomb after he recorded a video of himself calling on his country men (youth) in Ghana to take up arms against the State of Ghana. In the video, Abu Dujana also specifically directed his fellow Fulbe youth to rise up against local authorities in protest against what he called corruption, injustice and mistreatment. Such tactics are not uncommon, as they are meant to shore up membership for extremist groups. But Dujana’s case underlines the potential ethnic dimension of the extremist threat in Ghana. This comes at a time ethnic profiling and marginalization involving the Fulbe community is considered very widespread.

⁵ [Ghanaian among arrested ISIL-Libya fighters - UN report reveals \(citinewsroom.com\)](#)

⁶ [ISIS ‘Defeated’ in Iraq, 6000 African Fighters to Return to Africa \(moroccoworldnews.com\)](#)

⁷ [100 Ghanaians join ISIS – Minority \(ghanaweb.com\)](#)

In September 2021 thirty-three (33) suspected terrorists in the Savelugu area in Northern Ghana were arrested. The Ghanaian National Security operatives believed that some of the arrested suspects may have direct links to extremist groups in Mali and Burkina Faso. The government issued a memo in June 2021 warning over a possible ‘bandit’ attacks in some towns in the North of the country. Earlier in August 2020, the authorities were alerted over high level reconnaissance activities by ISIS intending to launch attacks on the country.

The developments compelled the government to undertake several security initiatives to secure the country’s borders and its internal security. Some of these include state counter-terrorism measures such

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as Operation Conquered Fists followed by ‘Exercise Eagle Claw 2020’ to empower security agencies to deal with possible multiple terror attacks in-country. Operation Koundanlou I, II and III, a joint multinational security operation involving Ghana, Burkina Faso, Togo Benin and Cote d’Ivoire focused on transnational crimes such as terrorism, smuggling, and drug trafficking. This has been complemented by the Accra Initiative first launched in 2017 to deal with inter-agency cooperation, coordination and intelligence sharing among member countries in the region. The Accra Initiative is a Collaborative and Cooperative Security mechanism intended to prevent spillover of terrorism from the Sahel and to address transnational organised crime and violent extremism in member countries’ border areas⁸.

Many analysis project the pervasive youth unemployment rate of about 5%⁹ as one of the biggest risks. The present government set up the Nation Builders Corps (NABCO) to absorb the high number of unemployed graduates, most of them temporarily. The

growing joblessness has driven many onto the cyber space to live on an illicit economy.

The determination of social activists such as the #FixTheCountry campaigners to exploit the security, economic and governance challenges amplifies the risks associated with youth grievances.

The above highlight the widespread nature of the threat to Ghana and underscores the importance and urgency needed to escalate national commitment to preventing the threat from spilling into Ghana.

Ghana has undertaken several measures as outlined above. But the country’s official response to the threat is contained in a National Framework for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism

(NAFPCVET) carved out of a National Security Strategy document. NAFPCVE provides a comprehensive scope in dealing with the threat ranging from education and awareness creation to intelligence sharing under four pillars. This puts the country on a good footing to deal with the threat. What is perhaps required is speed. Because

extremists do not wait. Without letting bureaucracy stand in the way, the NAFPCVET provides adequate space for Civil Society and local community actors to work together to build resilience against the threat. In addition, the Accra Initiative is a potentially effective tool. It requires Coastal States to work together to deepen intelligence gathering, inter-agency coordination and intelligence sharing to ensure immediacy of action to stop the threat from advancing further South.

But the overall effectiveness of Ghana’s response will be determined by the State’s willingness to recognise that the battle against terrorism and the drivers that underpin it cannot be won on the battlefield alone. It will be won in the local community in dealing with the drivers of radicalization and building resilience against the threat. It will be won by effectively addressing grievances, mobilizing local community support and goodwill to build the social and economic infrastructure that is required to build resilience against extremism.

⁸ [Accra Initiative – Mapping African regional cooperation – European Council on Foreign Relations \(ecfr.eu\)](#)

⁹ [Unemployment, total \(% of total labor force\) \(modeled ILO estimate\) - Ghana | Data \(worldbank.org\)](#)

The Threat of Violent Extremism in Ghana - Timelines

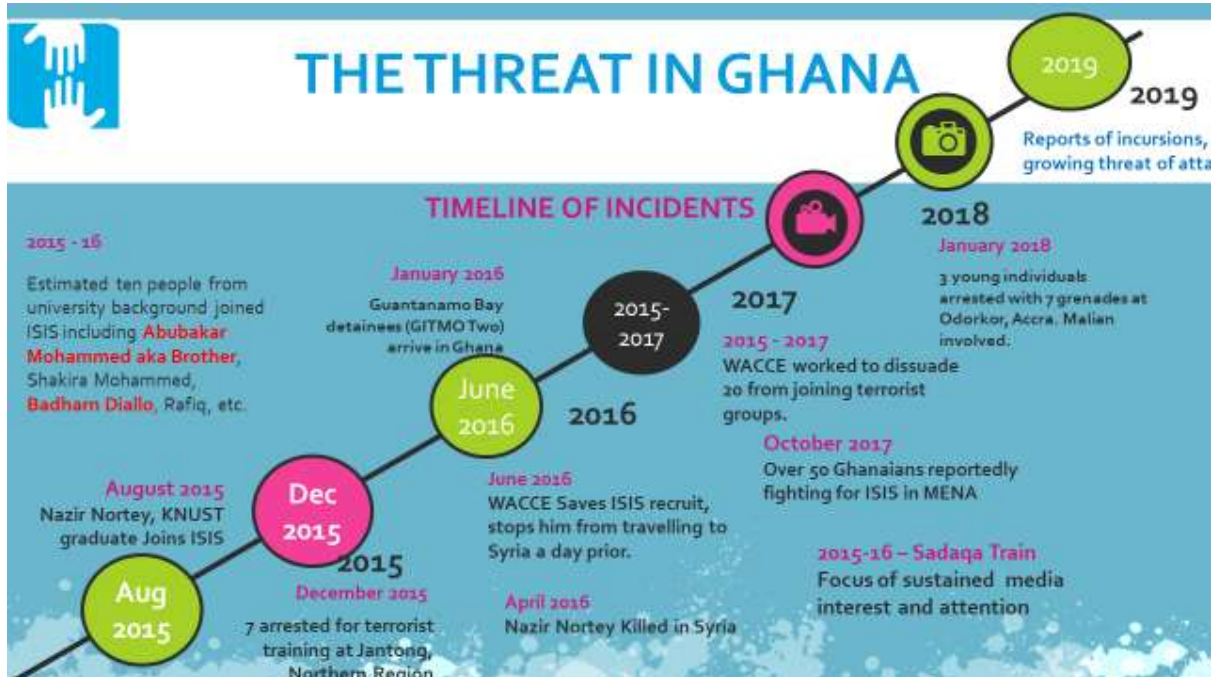


Figure 1.1: Timeline of events regarding VE activities in Ghana.

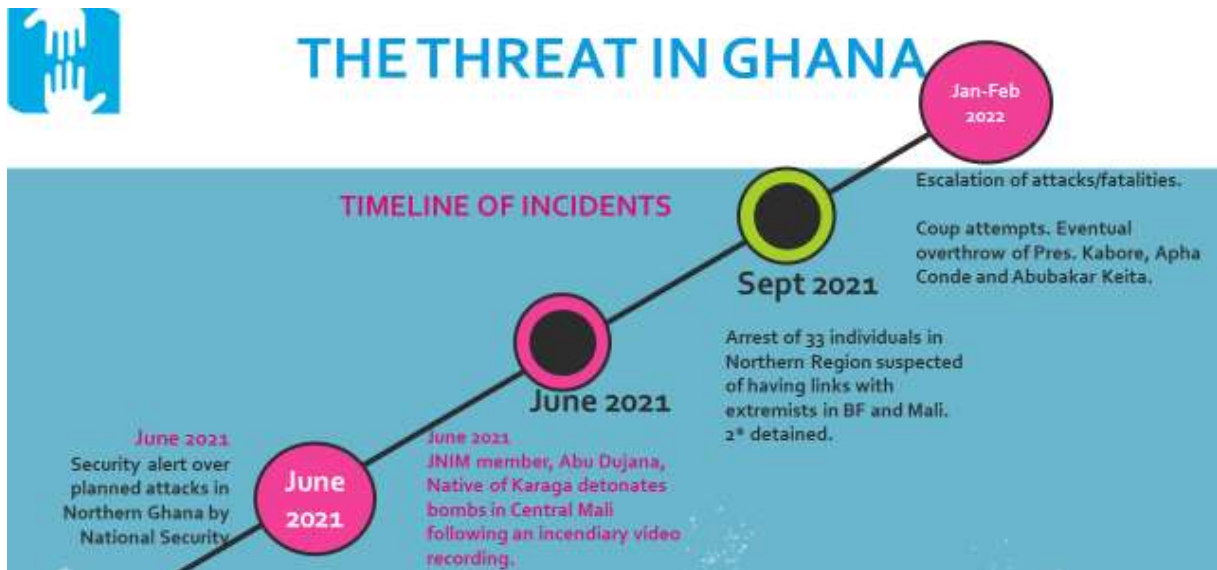


Figure 1.2: Timeline of events - VE activities in Ghana.