



White Paper: Updates on Violent Extremist Threat to Ghana

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Update on the Threat of Violent Extremism in Ghana

Thirty-three (33) suspected terrorists in the Savelugu District of the Northern Region of Ghana have been arrested and airlifted to Accra in the first week of September. Five (5) of the suspects are believed by the Ghanaian National Security operatives to have direct links to extremist groups in Mali and Burkina Faso.

This comes less than three months after Abu Dujana, a Ghanaian suicide bomber detonated a suicide car bomb at a French Reconnaissance camp in Mali. This was carried out near a French military camp in Gossi, Central Mali on June 21, under the directions of Jamaa'at Nusrat-ul Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), the biggest and deadliest terrorist group in Mali.

Three months ago in June, Ghanaian authorities issued a memo regarding an impending attack on towns close to its Northern borders. The threat has continued to grow in Burkina Faso. In late August, terrorists killed 80 Burkinabes including 15 soldiers, 59 civilians and 6 others. Three (3)

weeks earlier, over 130 people in a border village in Burkina Faso were massacred by extremist groups.

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The current development underscores the determination of extremists to expand into new

territories such as Ghana.

The current development also amplifies a serious ethnic dimension regarding the character of a potential attack in Ghana. Just like the June 21 bomber, the current suspects are believed to be of Fulani ethnic background. The leader of the group, an Islamic cleric, has lived and operated a local Arabic school for nearly two decades.

Their activities maybe fuelled by local grievances. In a pre-recorded video to bid farewell to his family, Abu Dujana called on Ghanaian youth, especially those from the Fulani ethnic group to take up arms against Ghana. By sacrificing his life for the cause, it is hoped that his death would inspire fellow Fulani men who may identify with him or feel marginalised to commit to joining the campaign. JNIM and other groups rely on a narrative of marginalization and local grievances to draw support from disgruntled members of local communities.

Just like the content of the video by Abu Dujana, the current arrest reveal the potential direct ethnic dimension the extremist threat might take in Ghana. The individuals arrested are of Fulani origin, in what appears to be a response to Abu Dujana's call. In Abu Dujana's pre-recorded video before his suicide mission, he called on the Fulani ethnic group to take up arms against the State.

The Fulani ethnic group is believed to be one of the highly marginalized and persecuted in many parts of Ghana, where they engage in cattle herding. In August 2020, more than 26 Fulani herdsman were reported to have been killed by unknown men in Karaga between August 2019 and February 2020. It drew anger from the local Fulani community, leading to an appeal by the leadership of the Fulani community to government to apprehend the perpetrators.

There is currently a turf war between JNIM and ISGS, the two biggest terrorist groups in the Sahel. The fight includes contestation for power and over territorial control. The chance to launch successful attacks in new areas emboldens the group and shores up its image as a capable

force. The current developments appear to be part of the agenda to exert themselves as a more capable belligerent force against the State.

Threat in Northern Ghana

A combination of porous borders, ethnic and religious grievances, social and economic grievances, religious and cultural tensions, governance and developmental deficits, and well established cross-border smuggling networks leave northern Ghana particularly vulnerable to radicalization narratives and terrorist attack. In 2018, the over a 170 suspected terrorists were arrested along the northern Togo-Ghana border and during the March 2019 joint counter-terrorism operation *Otapuana* in southern Burkina Faso, when Burkinabe officials alerted Ghana to violent extremist hiding in the north.

In 2018, 3 individuals were apprehended in possession of grenades in Accra, one with alleged ties to ISIS in Libya. Between 2014 and 2018, the West Africa Centre for Counter-Extremism (WACCE) successfully

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dissuaded 22 radicalized individuals from fleeing to enlist as combatants for extremist groups. This includes a radicalized youth from Northern Ghana, who declined

only a day before he was scheduled to depart to Syria to join ISIS after watching WACCE’s *PVE in Ghana* program on local television. Like many others, he reached out to WACCE for help. Without any national deradicalization program, it is a challenge to deal with individuals who are already radicalized or exposed to radicalizing propaganda.

Extremist attacks are no longer a remote possibility on Ghana. There is already significant intelligence revealing details of a reconnaissance by extremists to attack Ghana. The recce highlights the high level of exposure of critical security information on Ghana to external sources. The security concern therefore is that it is now only a matter of time before extremist violence extends into Ghana.

The state needs to escalate its commitment to preventing the threat on home soil. It requires deepening intelligence gathering, inter-agency coordination and intelligence sharing to ensure immediacy of actions to prevent any potential attacks. It also requires not only state combat security and border security measures, but also engaging civil society and the local community to work together to build resilience against the threat.

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