



White Paper: Updates on Violent Extremist Threat to Ghana

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Creation Date:

July 2021

Last Updated:

July 2021

Project Code:

WACCE-PVE

Filename:

Version:

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Update on the Threat of Violent Extremism to Ghana

Whilst Ghana has managed so far to avoid terrorist attacks in a turbulent region characterised by pervasive terrorist violence for more than a decade, the threat to Ghana continues to grow imminent. On June 21, 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, under the directions of Jamaa'at Nusrat-ul Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), the biggest and deadliest terrorist group in Mali.

The attack by Abu Dujana, a terrorist of Ghanaian origin from the Northern town of Karaga is a grim reminder of not only the increasing danger the Sahel faces but also underlines the proximity of the threat to Ghana. This attack comes only 2 weeks after the Ghanaian authorities issued a memo regarding an impending attack on towns close to its Northern borders and 3 weeks after the massacre of over 130 people in a border village in Burkina Faso. It amplifies the resolve of extremists to expand into new territories such as Ghana, previously unknown to terrorism.

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Part of extremist groups' tactic is to train recruits who would later be able to help recruit fellow citizens, lead or launch attacks against home country. This raises further fears that many more Ghanaians who are currently with extremist groups

could be helping to plot attacks against Ghana. This should put Ghanaian security actors on alert posture. But it also reveals other serious dimensions of the challenge to Ghana.

It is a common tactic for suicide attackers to use 'martyrdom' to appeal to vulnerable and a marginalised base to rally support for their jihadist cause. 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.

The content of the video also reveals the potential direct ethnic dimension the extremist threat might take in Ghana as he called on the Fulani ethnic group to take up arms against the State. The Fulani ethnic group feels highly marginalized and persecuted in many parts of Ghana, where they engage in cattle herding. In August 2020, more than 26 Fulani herdsmen 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. The attacker's call for arms seeks to exploit the existing grievances against the state.

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.

Ghana has not been totally free of terrorism. In September 2013, Professor Kofi Awoonor was killed in a siege by the Al-Shabab terrorist group in Kenya. In 2015, Mohammad Nazir Nortei Alema, a graduate from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (NKUST) left Ghana to join ISIS as a fighter in Syria. It alarmed the local population for a nation that for a long time has been known and celebrated for peace and political stability. So far, more than 13 youth including 3 females are believed to have left Ghana to join extremist groups. This numbers may grow as the vulnerabilities and drivers of violent extremism continue to be a pervasive phenomenon in Ghana. The mode of recruitment involves use of scholarship schemes in the Gulf or North Africa, job opportunities and enticing religious narratives around Salafism online.

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

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