

The Looming Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) Threat in Northern Ghana

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Abstract

Northern Ghana, which has always been socio-economically marginalized and engulfed in inter-communal conflicts, is under a perceived and real threat from the south-western expansion of Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), the most powerful affiliate of al-Qaeda in West Africa. In this paper, the author will argue that a combination of the demonstrated expansionist approach by JNIM and the deep internal vulnerabilities in Northern Ghana, such as porous borders, state neglect, endemic youth unemployment, and exploitable local conflicts, provides fertile ground on which the organization could infiltrate and use violent extremism. It is not just a hypothetical danger; JNIM is increasing its operations in the neighboring areas of Burkina Faso and making calculated attempts to take advantage of the weaknesses of the Ghanaian northern border. An all-military solution cannot succeed because it overlooks the policy and developmental shortcomings that create local resentments. This analysis, therefore, requires an urgent, holistic, and pre-emptive plan that combines greater, community-responsive security provisions with an aggressive campaign to deal with the causes of instability so as to protect the democracy of Ghana as well as stability in the region.

Keywords: JNIM (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin), Northern Ghana, Violent Extremism, Border Security, Counter-Radicalization

Introduction

Northern Ghana is a region that is marked by a rich cultural heritage and tricky socio-economic realities on the verge of a security crisis with serious consequences for national and regional stability. Over the years, the region has been struggling with the complex problems of endemic poverty, environmental destruction, and recurring communal violence. But there is a darker cloud looming larger in the distance of the Sahel now, that of the gradual southward expansion of Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), the strongest affiliate of al-Qaeda in West Africa. The advanced combination of jihadist rhetoric, exploitation of local grievances, and unremitting military force has already plunged the neighbors into instability, establishing a zone of instability that borders Ghana to the north (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2023). Although Ghana has indeed been viewed as a citadel of democracy and relative stability in a troubled continent, this sense of impunity is incredibly complacent. The area of strategic growth of JNIM and the underlying vulnerabilities of Northern Ghana, like widespread state lack of care, inter-group conflicts, and lack of economic prospects, provides fertile conditions where the group can seize an opportunity (Institute for Security Studies [ISS], 2024). This paper will argue that the JNIM threat to Northern Ghana is not a far-off hypothetical, but a tangible and immediate threat that requires a comprehensive and pre-emptive intervention that combines the addition of security features with a decisive campaign that will correct the deficiencies in governance and development that make the region vulnerable to violent extremism. In comparison to domestic criminality or local disputes over chieftaincy, JNIM is a transnational insurgent group that is politically inclined and has demonstrated the ability to overthrow the government and govern territory. It does not simply attack, but its modus operandi are to establish itself through exploiting local grievances to create a friendly social foundation. As described by Warner and Hummel (2023), the approach of JNIM is based on a hearts-and-minds campaign, where it offers basic services and takes advantage of the conflicts between communities and governments at the center to establish itself as a crusader of the poor. Particularly powerful in the border areas of Northern Ghana, where cross-border ethnic connections, including those between the Fulani (Peul) peoples, can be used both as a source of recruitment and to provide logistical assistance (Lynch, 2023). Most importantly, the group has the relative impudence of functioning across the border in Burkina Faso, which gives it strategic depth and a launch pad for incursions into Ghanaian territory, which is ominously similar to the

early push factors of the insurgency in Burkina Faso a decade ago (ICG, 2023). Sensations of perceived marginalization over decades have created a system of alienation within most of the populations in the north. The main signs of state weakness, including the lack of trust in security agencies, the inability to access justice, and the blaring infrastructure gaps, are highly prominent (USAID, 2023). Moreover, the historical conflict between farmers and herders, which is often based on a lack of access to diminishing natural resources compounded by climate change, offers an easy source of community-level grievances that JNIM can use (Abdulai & Tonah, 2022). The group is finding it easy to position the Ghanaian state as apathetic or even unfriendly to the state of some communities and provide its own form of inhumane justice and defense as an alternative. In that regard, the emergence of JNIM cannot be seen as a simple security event, but a possible trigger that might turn the simmering under-the-carpet socio-economic and political frustrations into an outright insurgency. Thus, a mere militaristic approach, which only involves defending the border, is doomed to failure. It would cure the ailments and leave the illness unmentioned. The Sahel experience demonstrates one thing: a policy that fails to effectively respond to the underlying causes of local dissatisfaction would only push populations closer to the rebel forces (ISS, 2024). The paper will further examine how Northern Ghana is susceptible to vulnerabilities, examine the strategy and capacity of JNIM, and offer a detailed policy recommendation. Such proposals will promote a whole-of-government, whole-of-society strategy to align specific security sector reformation, hastened economic growth, strategic inter-communal consultation, and preemptive community-based anti-radicalization measures. The future of Ghana, and consequently its position as an anchor state in West Africa, lies in the action that needs to be taken before the storm gathers too much power.

Background and Context

Who is JNIM?

Jama Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), meaning the Group of the Supporters of Islam and Muslims, is the main jihadist threat in the Sahel and the strongest affiliate of al-Qaeda in the world arena. JNIM was not founded in March 2017, but its creation was a strategic merger of four already existing al-Qaeda-linked groups, including Ansar Dine, led by a charismatic figure, Iyad Ag Ghaly; Macina Liberation Front (FLM), led by a radical Fulani preacher, Amadou Kouffa; al-

Mourabitoun, led by the infamous Algerian jihadist Mokhtar Belmokhtar; and the Sahara Emirate of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (Warner & Hummel, 2023). The ideology of the group is a calculated move to create a unified front with international and regional military forces, stream command structures, and control, in addition to improving the efficiency of operations in a large portion of territory between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Although its long-term ambition is an Islamic emirate under its strict interpretation of Sharia law, its daily appeal lies in a strong criticism of the post-colonial Sahelian state. JNIM positions its jihad as self-defense against corrupt, Western-supported governments, which it claims persecute Muslims and leave Islamic values unobserved (Lynch, 2023). It has strong leadership that is entrenched in the ethnic and social fabric of the region. The JNIM way of operating is a virtuoso performance of asymmetric warfare and political subversion: legitimized among the communities of the north by Iyad Ag Ghaly, a Malian Tuareg of noble lineage, and among the marginalized Fulani pastoralist communities in the region by the sermons of Amadou Kouffa (Thurston, 2022). It is a mixture of devastating and complex attacks on military establishments and international targets with an advanced hearts-and-minds approach. JNIM, in the regions where it controls its influence, poses as a parallel state, administering a form of rough justice, resolving local conflicts, and sometimes even providing food and supplies, which directly challenges the legitimacy and imposition of force by the state (ICG, 2023a). This two-track strategy of brutal violence against the state and selective delivery of governance has enabled it to establish a new presence in local society and dominate larger and larger areas of central and northern Mali, and throughout the north and east of Burkina Faso. Importantly, the ambitions of JNIM are not limited to the Sahel. Its leaders have stressed its expansionist approach on several occasions, which seeks to penetrate the West African coastal states. The group has specifically threatened Ghana, Togo, and Benin, calling them the backyard of the crusaders and declaring its intention to free its Muslim population (JNIM Statement, 2022, as cited in Zenn, 2023). This southward expansion is a strategic necessity: it is aimed at reaching new resources, recruiting from new populations, disabling the economic life support of the Sahelian states, and proving the ineffectiveness of the so-called more stable democracies of West Africa. This planned, on-record effort of southward expansion converts the menace to Northern Ghana from an issue on the periphery of national security into one at the center.

JNIM's Proximity to Ghana

The conceptual risk of JNIM expansion has now become a practical and imminent risk, as a noticeable and threatening trend of consolidation and operational presence in the territories bordering Ghana to the north is evident. Since 2021, the border areas of Burkina Faso, especially the Est and Boucle du Mouhoun regions, have been experiencing a dramatic increase in the activity of JNIM. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), violent incidences in the southern territories of Burkina Faso bordering Ghana have increased by more than 300 percent from 2021 to 2023 (ACLED, 2024). Cases are no longer restricted to the interiors but are being reported in the border districts such as Kompienga and Pama, and in some cases just a few kilometers off the Ghanaian frontier. JNIM is known to have conducted systematic operations to penetrate the border areas, which are documented using intelligence reports and assessments by the UN Panel of Experts. In a report published in 2023 by the Institute of Security Studies (ISS), the location of JNIM is mapped, indicating a kind of contagion effect, where the group is using uncontrolled areas and pre-established transit routes to spread its influence southwards (ISS, 2024). This is supported by the local media and security agencies in Ghana, which have documented the presence of armed men in the country and the spread of jihadist propaganda in the border districts, a standard precursor to the start of more active operations (Daily Graphic, 2023).

Ghana is particularly susceptible in the border districts of the country, including Bawku, Pusiga, and Binduri in the Upper East Region, and Bole and Chereponi in the Savannah and North East Regions, respectively. This weakness is a consequence of a combination of conditions that provide an enabling environment for JNIM intrusion. Examples include: The border is extensive, not delimited in parts, and does not have the number of personnel and technologies that could qualify as surveillance resources to effectively monitor it. This will permit the free movement of individuals, goods, and weapons, and it will be almost impossible to interdict small and mobile JNIM cells (Ghana Immigration Service, 2023). There is also the Bawku region, which is marred by a long-running and violent chieftaincy fight between the Kusasis and Mamprusis. The approach that JNIM has taken elsewhere has consisted of taking advantage of such local fractures, providing its services as a defender on one side, or merely taking advantage of the mess to get a foothold (USAID, 2023). The group can easily portray the state as not offering security or justice. Moreover,

there are strong ethnic and family ties across the border, especially between the Fulani groups. JNIM has managed to find Fulani pastoralists who feel disenfranchised by central governments. The networks across borders can easily be used in logistics, collecting intelligence, and recruiting, which offers JNIM an inbuilt support system at the entry (Lynch, 2023). What is more, many of these border districts lack infrastructure and state services of the most fundamental order. Lack of institutional justice, economic prospects, and plausible security agencies leaves an absence of power and legitimacy—a vacuum that JNIM is masterfully crafted to seal (Abdulai, 2022).

Drivers and Risk Factors

The susceptibility of Northern Ghana to infiltration and violence by Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) is not due to any single cause; instead, it is a combination of numerous and interdependent forces. All these result in a free space where radical thought patterns can be established, and terrorist non-state organizations can function with relative impunity. These may be structural, socioeconomic, and regional in nature, which increases the risk of the others to a greater proportion.

Structural Drivers

The border of Northern Ghana and Burkina Faso is long, has poor demarcation, is not closely monitored, and is more of a contact area than a strict border. Ghana Immigration Service and other security agencies do not have the human resources, sophisticated technology (drones and thermal imaging), or logistics to efficiently patrol this expansive region (Ghana Immigration Service, 2023). This porosity is a strategic resource for JNIM, enabling them to move fighters, weaponry, and contraband undetected. Worsening this is the long-standing lack of strength of state institutions in the rural border districts. Most communities encounter the state via security patrols every now and then, with little to no access to formal justice, quality education, or healthcare. This forms what scholars term ungoverned spaces—not vacuums, but places where the formal state is absent or weak, enabling other authorities to develop parallel systems of control and dispute resolution, such as JNIM (Institute for Development Studies, 2022). The north has more than twice the national average levels of poverty, lack of access to electricity, clean water, and paved roads (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). This long-term underinvestment has left an economy of

desperation, especially among young people. According to the World Bank (2022), severely lacking any feasible economic options, the population will be more prone to the financial incentives extended by armed groups. JNIM agents may provide recruits and local communities with cash payments to seek shelter or information, and in such an environment of severe economic marginalization, cooperation becomes a rational, albeit risky, survival strategy. To add to it, there is a strong feeling of marginalization, both politically and economically, experienced in Northern Ghana, which breeds hatred towards the central government. It is a strong narrative that JNIM can exploit, in which the Ghanaian state is a corrupt and southern-dominated institution that has failed to support its people in the north (Abdulai, 2022). Second, there are already inter-ethnic tensions, the most notable being the long-standing and bloody chieftaincy war between Kusasis and Mamprusis in Bawku, which JNIM can exploit as an already available fault line. The playbook established by JNIM consists of its introduction into conflicts on the ground, the proposal of its services to one side, and its establishment as a protector, which allows it to gain a foothold and further destabilize the situation (USAID, 2023). Failures of the state to solve such conflicts on a long-term basis are another sign of negligence, which further undermines its legitimacy.

Socioeconomic and Ideological Drivers

In Northern Ghana, the number of youths is enormous in terms of the youth bulge, and unemployment and underemployment are disastrous. Young people with little or no prospects of formal employment and an uncertain agricultural future due to climate variability are rendered unemployed and idle, with no sense of future. This frustrated generation is one of the best sources of recruitment. As has been demonstrated in the Sahel, jihadist organizations such as JNIM can provide disillusioned youth with a source of income, but also a sense of meaning, identity, and strength (International Crisis Group, 2023b). The possibility of a sense of belonging and agency to a cause that is bigger than oneself is a strong attractant to the economically and politically marginalized. Moreover, JNIM has not sought to impose its ideology in a vacuum; rather, it has been distorted at a pace to be used on top of the local religious custom. A tradition of the group, and their predecessors, is to send itinerant preachers to susceptible communities to proselytize and to found religious schools (madrassas). By propagating a Salafi-jihadist, rigid, intolerant version of Islamic teachings that demonize the state and other religious or ethnic communities, these preachers take advantage of the real religious faith (Lynch, 2023). They present the war as a

religious obligation, a defensive jihad against a non-Muslim or apostate government. Such religious justification of violence gives the act of criminal or political banditry a divine intent, making it a divine battle, which is very convincing in a highly religious society.

Regional and Transnational Factors

The greatest external factor is the increasing insurgency in southern Burkina Faso. With JNIM and its competitor, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), consolidating power on the territory of Burkinabé near the border, the conflict is bound to spill. This spillover happens in a number of ways: direct incursion by militant cells, refugee flight which may be trailed or infiltrated by militants, and the displacement of violent patterns of farmer-herder conflict. According to the data of ACLED (2024), the presence of the so-called contagion effect, according to which the instability of one border district directly raises the risk of violence in the adjacent district across the national border, is evident, but the possibility of ECOWAS to effectively address transnational jihadist threats is limited. The bureaucracy, mistrust, and incompatible systems tend to hinder coordination between the Ghanaian, Burkinan, Togolese, and Ivoirian security services (Aning & Abdallah, 2022). The absence of such an integrated and real-time intelligence-sharing system implies that JNIM cells can use the borders between national jurisdictions and cross national borders to evade national counter-terrorist efforts. This regional disunification is a severe facilitator of an agile, transnational enemy. On top of that, Northern Ghana is not a singular objective, but it may represent a new point on a large-scale jihadist system in the region. JNIM belongs to a complex network of smuggling procedures of arms, drugs, and other contrabands crossing the Sahel. Some of these routes extend to Ghana easily, with some of them traveling through northern Benin and Togo (Zenn, 2023). Entry to this network would mean that JNIM would obtain a constant flow of resources and weapons, and the insurgency would perhaps be more stable and economically independent.

Conclusion and Policy Responses

The brewing crisis on Ghana's northern borders is shaping up to be a major test of the country's national security and democratic fortitude. The analysis reveals that the JNIM threat is not only imminent but also facilitated from within a complex network of domestic vulnerabilities. A

narrowly focused, reactive security response risks harming the very communities it is meant to protect, and possibly fueling the insurgency it is intended to suppress. The lessons from the Sahel are harsh: enduring security is not possible without legitimate governance and real economic prospects. To address this multi-dimensional challenge, Ghana will need to develop a multi-dimensional, “whole-of-government, whole-of-society” approach that aligns activities across diverse areas.

Policy Responses

Strengthen Borders with Community Engagement: Strengthen border security through enhanced patrols and technology such as drones and thermal imaging, but importantly, weave these efforts into the fabric of community life. Create and train community-based watchdog groups that can work as the eyes and ears of the state, building a cooperative approach as opposed to a militarized occupation. That builds trust and ensures intelligence is culturally and linguistically informed.

Prioritize and Speed Up Inclusive Economic Development: Initiate a focused, public-private development thrust for the northern areas, with emphasis on providing quick economic opportunities for the youth. This should include vocational training relevant to market demands, seed capital for small and medium enterprises, and funding for climate-resilient agriculture. Showing a real stake in economic fairness counters the narrative of state abandonment and lessens the financial lure of working with extremists.

Enable Strategic Inter-Communal Dialogue: Develop permanent, state-sponsored dialogue structures to settle the chieftaincy and farmer-herder tensions—beyond fleeting peacekeeping. Involve traditional leaders, civil society, and women’s organizations in these discussions to tackle the underlying grievances that JNIM uses to fragment communities and portray itself as an agent.

Initiate Active Counter-Radicalization Initiatives: Promote and implement a national counter-violent extremism (CVE) strategy focused at the community level. Among other things, this means training local imams to confront jihadist ideology, revising curricula in both formal schools and informal madrassas to teach tolerance, and launching public-awareness initiatives underscoring the destructive nature of extremist organizations.

Establish Effective Regional Security and Intelligence Cooperation: Pursue improved intelligence sharing and joint operations with neighbors, especially Burkina Faso, Togo, and Benin, within ECOWAS auspices. This should include the development of real-time communication links and the harmonization of procedures to prevent JNIM from taking advantage of border gaps among states.

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