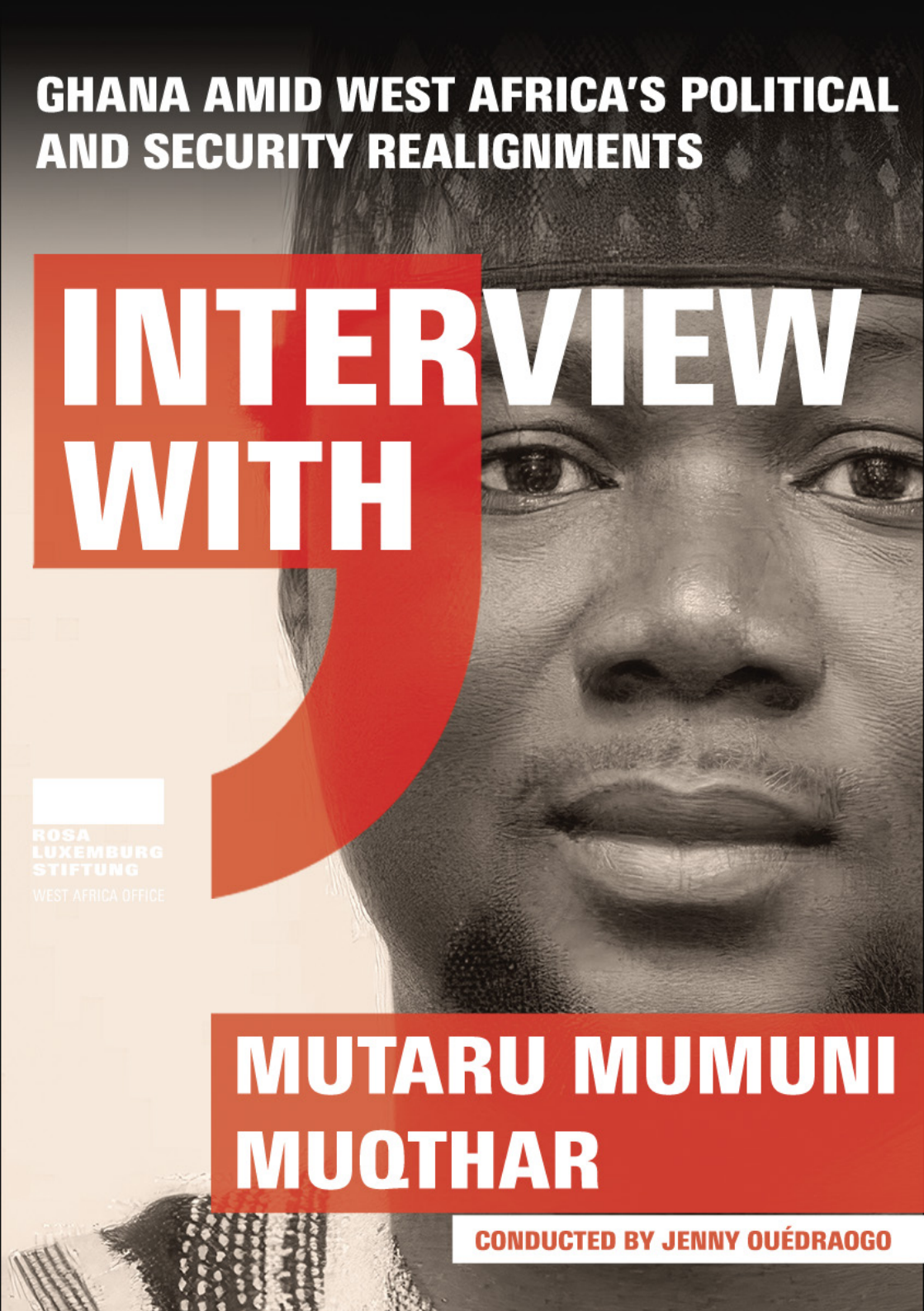
GHANA AMID WEST AFRICA'S POLITICAL AND SECURITY REALIGNMENTS

INTERVIEW WITH



ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG
WEST AFRICA OFFICE

MUTARU MUMUNI MUQTHAR

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MUTARU MUMUNI MUQTHAR

Founder and Executive Director of the West Africa Centre for Counter-Extremism (WACCE)

Ghana is frequently described by international observers as an "island of stability" and a democratic success story in an increasingly volatile region. How do you assess this characterisation?

Ghana has been an island of relative peace in a region plagued by insecurity for more than two decades. West Africa has become an epicentre of global terrorism, with several of the world's most affected countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The region also faces conflicts over resources and marginalisation, political instability and military coups. Three countries have withdrawn from ECOWAS to form a separate bloc—an unprecedented development in the organisation's history. Against this backdrop, Ghana's political stability is significant. Yet Ghana has never been more exposed to violent extremism. Attacks in Burkina Faso have moved closer to our borders; there have also been incidents near the Ghana–Togo border and attacks in Côte d'Ivoire. Ghana is hosting more than 25,000 refugees fleeing insecurity, particularly in Burkina Faso, and the number may be higher. Reception facilities have been established in the north, while displaced people continue to arrive. We also have longstanding internal conflicts over ethnicity, land and community relations, notably in Bawku. Extremist organisations could exploit these tensions. Governance deficits, inadequate infrastructure and public services, and youth unemployment compound the risks, especially in communities along Ghana's northern borders.

You have highlighted tensions involving Fulbe communities in northern Ghana. How do ethnic identity, marginalisation and insecurity intersect, and how might extremist groups exploit these dynamics?

Ghanaians of different ethnic backgrounds have generally lived together

and integrated relatively well since independence. Nevertheless, ethnic tensions have sometimes escalated into deadly violence, particularly in the north but also in parts of the south. The situation of Fulbe communities is especially concerning. Across West Africa, Fulbe people face significant marginalisation. Many are pastoralists who move seasonally with their cattle in search of pasture, which can bring them into conflict with farming communities. They may face hostility from local populations and extortion by security personnel. Extremist groups exploit such experiences of discrimination and injustice for recruitment. We have seen concrete examples. A young Fulbe man from northern Ghana was recruited by Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and taken to central Mali, where he helped mobilise other recruits. Before a planned suicide attack, he recorded a video urging young people to rise up against Ghanaian society and the state, citing discrimination, marginalisation, injustice and corruption. Online platforms also circulate grievances involving Fulbe communities. These dynamics create vulnerabilities that extremist organisations exploit.

How do you assess the government's recent mediation efforts to resolve the longstanding conflict in Bawku? What challenges remain, and how might the conflict increase vulnerability to violent extremism in northern Ghana?

The conflict in Bawku is a defining source of instability in northern Ghana. It predates independence and centres on a longstanding dispute between the Kusasi and Mamprusi communities over traditional authority and the position of Bawku Naba, the area's paramount chief. Political, economic, social and religious peacebuilding efforts have struggled to resolve it. A recent government mediation process has produced some outcomes, but it risks being perceived as winner-takes-all. The outcome reaffirmed recognition of the Kusasi chief as the legitimate Bawku Naba, without upholding the competing Mamprusi claim. In my view, this leaves one community feeling vindicated and the other excluded. Such a perception makes sustainable peace difficult, and violence has continued. The government has cited roughly 45 to 50 days without gunfire as progress. That is welcome, but it is too early to declare success. Both communities must feel that they bene-

fit from peace. Recognition of traditional authority must be accompanied by efforts to address the grievances of those who feel excluded; otherwise, young people who believe they have been treated unfairly may be difficult to restrain. The conflict is also politicised, and a change of government could reopen disputes over the settlement. This matters for the wider security situation because extremist organisations exploit existing conflicts. According to the Global Terrorism Index, more than 93 per cent of terrorism fatalities in 2024 occurred in countries already experiencing conflict. Bawku therefore remains a particular concern.

How do you assess the Mahama government's approach to preventing violent extremism since taking office in January 2025?

The Mahama government inherited both the threat of violent extremism spreading southwards from the Sahel and strained relations with neighbouring Sahelian states, particularly Burkina Faso. It moved quickly to rebuild trust: representatives of the Sahelian countries were invited to the president's inauguration, and a special envoy was appointed to improve relations and coordination with the Sahel and ECOWAS. These efforts have helped restore channels for security cooperation and intelligence sharing. At home, the government has continued implementing the national framework for preventing and countering violent extremism developed under its predecessor. My organisation is involved in reviewing that framework, including consultations across five northern regions. But the framework is not widely understood. Public education and community engagement remain inadequate. There is a campaign built around the slogan 'If you see something, say something.' Yet people need to know what to look for, what to report, whom to contact and how. Ghana's long experience of peace has sometimes encouraged complacency. Civil society needs greater capacity to help communities recognise and prevent threats. At the same time, persistent inequalities between northern and southern Ghana, poor infrastructure and limited opportunities for young people cannot be resolved through security awareness alone. The government is moving too slowly on these underlying issues.

Youth unemployment, economic hardship and social marginalisation are often cited as factors contributing to violent extremism. What role do these conditions play in extremist recruitment in Ghana and how do they interact with other factors?

Economic hardship and youth unemployment create vulnerabilities that extremist organisations can exploit, but no single factor explains recruitment. Many people experience poverty without becoming involved in terrorism. What matters is how economic pressures interact with grievances, perceptions of injustice and a person's wider social environment. For some young people, joining an extremist organisation reflects a loss of confidence in the state's willingness or ability to provide what I call the entitlements of citizenship. There is a statement from research we have been involved in that I often refer to: 'The government is the problem, and the government is also the solution. But whoever provides the solution becomes our government.' When the state fails to respond to people's needs, they may turn to actors who appear to offer an alternative. In some communities, extremist groups have stepped into gaps in services and opportunities, making young people feel valued. Recruitment is not only about material needs. Young people may also seek recognition, visibility, power and belonging. I once worked with a young man recruited by ISIS and prevented him from travelling. Later, I asked why he had wanted to join ISIS's central organisation rather than its West African affiliate, ISWAP. His answer was the uniform: he associated the central organisation with better equipment and funding, and with status and recognition. It challenged assumptions about what motivates recruits. Social media can amplify these aspirations, offering the prospect of visibility or a heroic identity far removed from everyday life. Prevention efforts need to understand those motivations rather than treating all recruits as driven by poverty alone.

How do communities experience counterterrorism operations, and how do the conduct of security forces, accountability and the protection of civilians shape trust in the state?

In Ghana, communities often initially welcome military deployments and hold security personnel in high regard. But goodwill can quickly disappear when operations involve abuses. Bawku is an example: curfews

and their enforcement may restrict daily life, and abuses of authority can turn initially positive relations into hostility. Trust and the protection of civilians are therefore central to effective security policy. The problem extends across the Sahel. Counterterrorism responses have been heavily militarised, with governments and international partners investing in operations to destroy extremist infrastructure. Yet terrorism has persisted despite MINUSMA, France's Operation Barkhane, the G5 Sahel Joint Force and other deployments. MINUSMA became one of the UN's deadliest peacekeeping missions. These efforts have too often failed to build trust with communities or address why people join extremist organisations. Security operations must respect human rights and be accompanied by measures that address grievances and strengthen local resilience. Better intelligence sharing and regional coordination are important, but military force cannot substitute for relationships of trust between the state and its citizens.

How do you assess Ghana's efforts to maintain relations with the Sahelian military governments while remaining part of ECOWAS? What political and strategic interests shape its approach?

Ghana is well placed to help bridge the divide between ECOWAS and the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The withdrawal of three countries from ECOWAS and the creation of a separate bloc have fragmented regional cooperation. Since those governments are unlikely simply to abandon the AES and return to ECOWAS, restoring dialogue is essential. Ghana's new government benefited from the goodwill that often accompanies a change in leadership. It used that opportunity to rebuild relations with the Sahelian states, with encouraging results. Ghana also has an interest in reaffirming its role as a regional actor in diplomacy, stability and security. This approach is consistent with a longer diplomatic tradition. Since independence, Ghana has often sought to mediate international and regional disputes and was a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement. Kwame Nkrumah himself pursued international diplomacy and was on a mission to Asia when he was overthrown in 1966. Although Ghana's foreign policy has not always been consistent, acting as a bridge rather than choosing exclusively between ECOWAS and the AES fits that tradition.

How are extremist organisations adapting to West Africa's changing regional security landscape? What do shifts in their strategies, geographical reach and recruitment reveal about the effectiveness of regional responses?

Violent extremist organisations plan strategically, assess results and adapt. One example is their response to fragmentation: groups that once operated separately combined their leadership, resources and logistics. JNIM emerged from such a merger, strengthening its ability to coordinate operations. They can also cooperate tactically despite differing political objectives. In Mali, for example, JNIM and the Tuareg-led Front for the Liberation of Azawad (FLA) reportedly carried out coordinated attacks against Malian government forces in April and July 2026. Their willingness to act against a common adversary illustrates this pragmatism. Their targets have changed as well. In landlocked Mali, attacks on fuel convoys and economic infrastructure can disrupt supplies and undermine public services, including schools and healthcare. Geographically, their operations are expanding: in October 2025, JNIM claimed an attack on Nigerian security forces in Kwara State, near the border with Benin. The attack reportedly killed a soldier and was described as the group's first publicly claimed operation in Nigeria. Competition also shapes their behaviour. Armed groups in Nigeria sometimes cooperate and sometimes compete for territory, influence and resources. Smaller groups may launch spectacular attacks to gain attention and attract support from larger networks. ISIS affiliates, for example, may seek recognition, funding and equipment from the central organisation. JNIM likewise seeks to demonstrate its strength. Boko Haram's attack on the UN headquarters in Abuja illustrated the same logic: striking a prominent international target drew attention to the group's reach and capabilities. Such attacks are not only acts of violence; they also communicate power to potential recruits, rivals and supporters.

How have external security partnerships shaped West Africa's security priorities and whose interests do they serve?

The European Union has played a major role in West African security through funding, training, equipment and other support. External partnerships can be valuable, but they also shape which security problems receive attention. Many programmes to prevent violent extre-

mism depend on foreign donors rather than domestic financing. As a result, donor priorities can determine what gets funded. Over the past decade, prevention of violent extremism has attracted considerable attention, sometimes at the expense of older conflicts over land, resources, ethnicity or political power. A European partner may be willing to support work on an ethnic conflict if it can be linked to terrorism, but less interested if it cannot. That creates a risk that local security priorities are defined by external funding opportunities rather than communities' own concerns. These relationships are driven by strategic interests on both sides - economic, political and security-related. European partners, for example, may seek to reduce risks that instability in West Africa could pose to Europe, including through migration, while also supporting local security capacity and information exchange. Cooperation can benefit both parties, but not necessarily equally. Often the actor designing and financing an agreement is best placed to shape its terms and reap its benefits.

Based on your experience, which dimensions of insecurity receive too little attention in current political debates? What would need to change in the way governments and regional institutions understand and respond to violent extremism?

I have said this many times, although some partners may not like to hear it: we invest too heavily in military capacity. Deterrence matters, but building the capacity to kill terrorists is not the same as ending terrorism. The more difficult task is to understand and address the conditions that allow extremist organisations to recruit and survive. A useful example is the World Bank-supported Gulf of Guinea Northern Regions Social Cohesion Project, which I was involved in developing around four years ago. It covered northern areas of Benin, Togo, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, with approximately US$450 million in funding, including around US$100 million for Ghana. The approach recognised that infrastructure, livelihoods, economic opportunities and public services are part of building resilience to violent extremism. Implementation had shortcomings, but that does not invalidate the underlying idea. We need sustained investment in communities and in the conditions that make people less vulnerable to exploitation. Military responses have a role, but they cannot deliver lasting security on their own.