Terrorism Spillover in the Sahel

21 JUNE 2026

Jorge Rivadeneira Daza



Terrorism Spillover in the Sahel

Terrorism Spillover in the Sahel: How Violence Crosses Borders

What Is Terrorism Spillover?

Terrorism spillover describes the process through which extremist violence spreads across borders and affects neighboring political spaces. As jihadist groups expand in the Sahel, an important question arises: why do some neighboring states experience terrorist expansion, while others remain comparatively less affected? This text focuses on terrorism spillover by examining three mechanisms: cross-border movement, recruitment networks, and the exploitation of local grievances. It then discusses Ghana as a case where these mechanisms have been limited rather than fully established.

Cross-Border Mobility

The Sahel illustrates how terrorism spillover can operate through cross-border movement. Countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have experienced the expansion of jihadist groups that move through difficult terrain and areas where state control is weak. In these contexts, borders do not fully stop armed groups, because fighters, weapons, information and illicit economic networks can navigate across neighboring territories.

This does not mean, however, that violence spreads automatically from one country to another. Terrorism spillover depends on whether armed groups can use cross-border spaces to organize, hide, recruit, or connect with local actors. For this reason, geographic proximity is relevant although not enough by itself to explain why some countries are affected more than others.

Recruitment and Local Grievances

Another mechanism of terrorism spillover is the ability of armed groups to connect their message to local grievances. In fragile border areas, terrorist groups may try to transform frustration, insecurity, poverty and weak justice systems into political support, presenting themselves not only as fighters but also as protectors or alternative providers of justice. This mechanism is important because terrorism spillover is not only about the movement of violence but also about whether armed groups can embed themselves in local communities; if people feel abandoned by the state, extremist narratives may become more persuasive. Where local communities still trust public institutions and local authorities, the recruitment of militants becomes more difficult.

Ghana and the Containment of Spillover Risk

Ghana is a useful case for understanding why terrorism spillover does not always materialize. Despite sharing a border with Burkina Faso, it has avoided the same level of jihadist violence affecting some of its northern neighbors, suggesting that a stable political regime and stronger links between local communities and public institutions can raise the cost of expansion for terrorist groups, limiting their ability to establish territorial influence.

Conclusion

Terrorism spillover explains how extremist violence can spread across borders. Ghana however shows that spillover is not automatic. Even when close to conflict zones, terrorism can be contained if communities remain connected to the state making illegal armed groups struggle to present themselves as credible alternatives.

Further readings

Populin, M., Berlingozzi, L., Caproni, L., Ibrahim, M. G., Sellitti, S., & Raineri, L. (2025, November). *Understanding resilience: Lessons from Ghana on preventing jihadist spillovers in the Gulf of Guinea* [Policy brief]. Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies. https://iris.santannapisa.it/retrieve/f39cbac6-818e-4a91-b33d-b414c2befa69/Policy%20Brief%20REJOWA_final.pdf

EPIS