

Sahelization: Conceptualizing a Perfect Storm

To understand why terrorism is spreading into the Gulf of Guinea, it is first necessary to understand what is happening in the Sahel. In recent years, this region has become one of the main epicentres of violence on the world and many of the dynamics that affect West Africa today originate there. The Sahel is a transitional strip located between the Sahara Desert and the savannah areas of sub-Saharan Africa, stretching from west to east over approximately 5,500 kilometres, and has an average width of close to 400 kilometres. Along this southern "shore" of the desert is the Sahel, an area where rainfall is scarce, between 200 and 600 millimetres per year, and where economic life largely depends on climatic cycles and the mobility of populations.¹

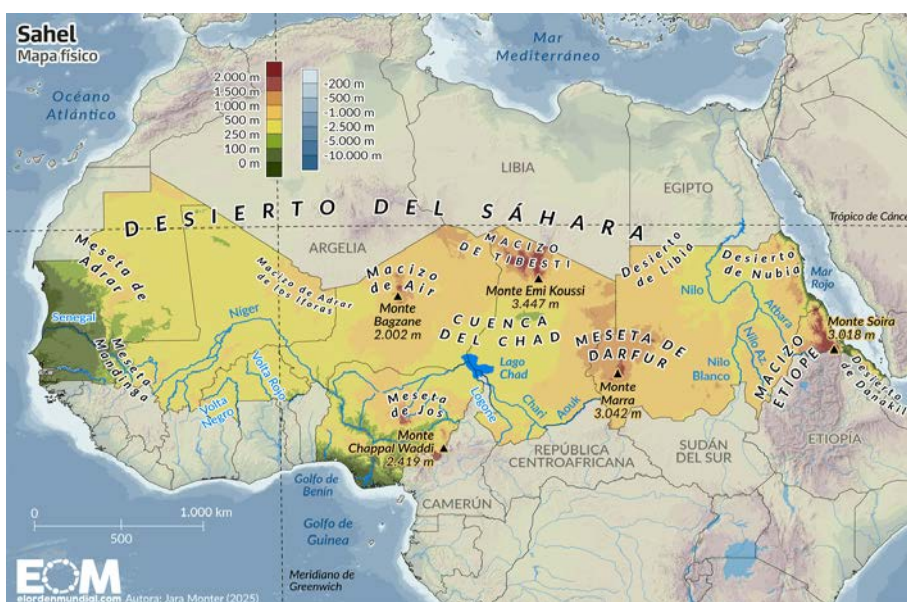


Figure 1. Map of the Sahel

Source: Jara Monter. El Orden Mundial.²

Historically, the Sahel has been more of a space of connection than a border; for centuries, it was crossed by trade routes that linked sub-Saharan Africa with the north of the continent and the Mediterranean. These routes facilitated the exchange of goods, people, and ideas between different regions of the continent, although today many have

¹ SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. Sahel: perfect storm of increasing amplitude and intensity! In: Geopolitical Panorama of Conflicts 2021. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), 2021, p. 229-252. Available at: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/panoramas/PGC2021/Cap_8_Sahel.pdf (accessed 21/11/2025).

² MONTER, Jara. The physical map of the Sahel. The World Order, February 21, 2025. Available at: <https://elordenmundial.com/mapas-y-graficos/mapa-fisico-sahel/> (accessed 09/12/2025).

changed their function, they continue to exist, and are used for activities such as informal trade, illicit trafficking, or migratory movements to Europe³. This tradition of mobility explains why the territory continues to function as a corridor in which people, goods, and increasingly, armed actors circulate.

This geographical reality is compounded by structural political fragility. Sahelian states share weak institutions, a strong presence of armed non-state actors, and a limited capacity to control large parts of their territory, especially in rural areas far from capitals⁴. Part of this situation has historical roots. The current borders were drawn during the colonial partition of Africa at the Berlin Conference (1884-1885), dividing communities and political structures that had functioned differently for centuries. After independence, many countries inherited centralized states that have had difficulty projecting their authority beyond major urban centres.

As a result, large peripheral areas have remained politically, socially, and economically marginalized for decades. In many cases, the presence of the State is minimal: infrastructure, basic services, and economic opportunities are lacking. This abandonment has generated power vacuums that have been exploited by different armed actors. Jihadist groups have been able to exploit this situation not only through violence, but also by presenting themselves as intermediaries in local conflicts, especially between pastoralist and farming communities⁵ competing for access to land and water. In this context, the Sahel has become the epicentre of terrorism worldwide. More than half of the world's recorded terrorism deaths are currently concentrated in this region, and five of the ten most affected countries are located in this region. Violence has increased rapidly in recent years: terrorism-related deaths in the Sahel are now almost ten times higher than in 2019.

³ WALTHER, Olivier J. and RETAILLÉ, Denis. "Mapping the sahelian space", Oxford handbook of the African Sahel, 1 May 2017. Available in <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1906.02223> (accessed 21/11/2025).

⁴ REY GALLEGO, Alejandro. Spain's role in Africa: main challenges and opportunities in the Sahel of the 21st century. ESFAS / Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), 2026. Available at: <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/esfas/papel-espanna-afrika-principales-retos-opportunidades-sahel-siglo-xxi> (accessed 20/01/2026).

⁵ In much of the Sahel, there are recurring tensions between nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists and sedentary farmers over access to land and water. Among the best-known pastoralist groups are the Fulani or Peul, present both in the Sahel and in the Gulf of Guinea, whose economy is traditionally based on livestock transhumance. Agricultural expansion, population growth and climate change have reduced grazing spaces, increasing inter-community conflicts that are sometimes instrumentalized by armed groups.

The core of this violence is placed, in the so-called Sahel triangle, formed by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. These three countries concentrate some of the highest levels of insecurity in the world. Burkina Faso has become the country most affected by terrorism globally, accounting for around a fifth of all terrorist deaths recorded in the world. Niger, for its part, recorded the largest increase in terrorism victims globally in 2024, with an increase of close to 94% compared to the previous year⁶. Violence in the region, responds to a dynamic that is difficult to break: when the State loses the capacity to guarantee security in certain areas, it also loses the capacity to govern and offer basic services. This aggravates poverty and lack of opportunities, which facilitates recruitment by armed groups; in turn, the presence of these groups further weakens state institutions and extends insecurity. This circle between security, governance, and development contributes to the reproduction of violence and expands into new areas.

The geography of the Sahel also facilitates this dynamic. The territory combines large expanses of desert with mountain massifs that make state control difficult and facilitate the movement of armed groups. Some of these spaces have become strategic refuges for jihadist organisations; the Adrar des Iforas massif, in northeastern Mali, has served for years as a sanctuary for groups linked to Al Qaeda, in the Islamic Maghreb and other terrorist organisations⁷. Similar terrain exists in other parts of the region, allowing these groups to hide, reorganize, and launch attacks in different countries.

In recent years, the situation has been aggravated by far-reaching geopolitical changes. Military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have led to a progressive break with traditional Western partners and reduced cooperation with some regional organizations; at the same time, these countries have sought new international alliances, which has altered the regional balance. This change has facilitated the entry of new external actors, including Russia, whose presence has been primarily channelled through the Wagner paramilitary group, later reorganised into the Africa Corps. This type of military support is attractive to military juntas because it involves fewer political conditions than cooperation with Western countries. However, their presence has also been linked to the exploitation

⁶ INSTITUTE FOR ECONOMICS & PEACE. *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*. Sydney, March 2025. Available at: <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/global-terrorism-index/> (accessed 09/11/2025).

⁷ MONTER, Jara. The physical map of the Sahel. *The World Order*, February 21, 2025. Available at: <https://elordenmundial.com/mapas-y-graficos/mapa-fisico-sahel/> (accessed 09/12/2025).

of natural resources, influence campaigns against the West, and an increase in violence against the civilian population⁸.

Since 2015, Burkina Faso has experienced a rapid deterioration in security. The situation has worsened especially after the coups d'état of 2022 and the subsequent institutional instability. The security strategy adopted by the military junta, led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré, is based on a policy of "total war" against armed groups. As part of this strategy, the recruitment of civilian militias known as *Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie* (VDP) has been expanded, supporting the army in local operations⁹. However, the increasing militarization of the population has also increased civilian exposure to violence. A significant example was the Barsalogho massacre in August 2024, where hundreds of civilians were killed during an attack while participating in the construction of community defences¹⁰.

The main jihadist actor in Burkina Faso is *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen* (JNIM), an al-Qaeda-affiliated coalition created in 2017 through the merger of several insurgent groups: al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar al-Din, the Macina Liberation Front and al-Murabitoun. Later, Ansarul Islam, the main Burkinabe jihadist group, joined¹¹. JNIM combines a hierarchical structure with strong operational decentralization, allowing it to adapt to local dynamics, integrate into rural communities, and leverage inter-community conflicts to expand its influence. In addition to JNIM, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS/EIGS) also operates in the region, especially in the area of the triple border between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Although its activity in Burkina Faso is less than that of JNIM, it maintains a presence in strategic corridors that facilitate the movement of fighters and resources¹². The rivalry between the two organisations has

⁸ GAZAPO LAPAYESE, Manuel J. Wagner in the Sahel: a paramilitary, demographic and informational threat to European security in Africa (IEEE Framework Document 04/2025). Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), 2025. Available at: <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieee/wagner-en-el-sahel> (accessed 20/12/2025).

⁹ International Crisis Group (2023). Containing Militancy in West Africa's Park W. Crisis Group Africa Report, 310. Disponible en: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso-niger-benin/310-containingmilitancy-west-african-park-w> (accessed 04/01/2026)

¹⁰ NARANJO, José. "An attack causes more than a hundred deaths and 140 wounded in Burkina Faso", El País. August 25, 2024. Available at: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2024-08-25/un-atentado-yihadista-causa-mas-de-un-centenar-de-muertos-y-140-heridos-en-burkina-faso.html> (accessed 09/02/2026)

¹¹ CRISIS GROUP. Containing militancy in West Africa's Park W. International Crisis Group, Report No. 310, year not indicated. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso-niger-benin/310-containing-militancy-west-african-park-w> (accessed 09/02/2026).

¹² INSTITUTE FOR ECONOMICS & PEACE. Global Terrorism Index 2025: *Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*. Sydney, March 2025. Available at: <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/global-terrorism-index/> (accessed 09/11/2025).

contributed to intensifying violence and increasing the lethality of attacks in the central Sahel.

Expansion into the Gulf of Guinea

In recent years, the Gulf of Guinea has acquired increasing relevance within the security dynamics of West Africa. Traditionally, jihadist violence was mainly concentrated in the central Sahel region. However, since the late 2010s, there has been a progressive shift of this threat towards the coastal states of West Africa.¹³

This maritime region, located on the Atlantic coast of West and Central Africa, is a vast geographical area. In its narrowest definition, it includes the coastal states between Ghana and Gabon, although in geopolitical terms it is often extended to encompass a coastal strip that extends from Senegal to Angola. This region has a high population density and a strong economic interdependence between coastal countries and the states of the interior of the continent. The countries of the Gulf of Guinea are home to hundreds of millions of inhabitants and an extensive coastline that exceeds 6,000 kilometres, a distance comparable to that between Madrid and Chicago.



Figure 2. Map of the Gulf of Guinea

Source: CSIS¹⁴

¹³ GARRIDO GUIJARRO, Óscar. The expansion of jihadism from the Sahel to the coastal countries of the Gulf of Guinea (IEEE Analysis Document 32/2024). Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), 2024. Available at: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2024/DIEEEA32_2024_OSCGAR_Yihadismo.pdf (accessed 04/01/2026).

¹⁴ Morcos, Pierre. "A Transatlantic Approach to Address Growing Maritime Insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea." *CSIS*. 1 febrero 2021. Available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/transatlantic-approach-address-growing-maritime-insecurity-gulf-guinea>. (accessed 12/12/2025)

One of its most relevant structural features is its role as the main maritime outlet for several Sahel countries that lack direct access to the sea. States such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger rely heavily on West African ports for the transport of goods. The ports located in the Gulf of Guinea are fundamental logistics nodes for regional trade, and for connecting West Africa with international markets, since they allow channelling both exports of raw materials and the import of essential products for the economies of the interior of the continent.

The shared border with Burkina Faso puts the spotlight on Benin, Togo, and Ghana, placing them at a critical point in the regional security landscape. All three countries have northern regions that maintain close social, cultural, and economic ties with communities across the border. These cross-border connections are part of the daily lives of many local populations and reflect the historical continuity of familial, commercial, and religious networks that predate the creation of today's state borders.

After abandoning the Marxist-Leninist model in the 1990s, Benin began a democratic transition marked by political alternation. However, in the last decade, Patrice Talon's government has implemented reforms that restrict opposition participation¹⁵. Despite maintaining macroeconomic stability, supported by the port of Cotonou and the agricultural sector, the country exhibits a significant territorial divide between the south and the northern regions, where poverty levels are higher and infrastructure is more limited¹⁶. This inequality, coupled with the lack of political representation in the north, has led to a growing rift between the local population and the state¹⁷. Insurgent pressure has also begun to extend to the political level: on April 17, 2025, in northern Benin, near WAP National Park, a JNIM attack led to the death of 54 soldiers, in the north, intensifying unrest within the army and fuelling accusations of government negligence towards deployed troops. This climate contributed to an attempted coup in December, fuelled by military grievances combined with broader political tensions, including the exclusion of

¹⁵ MELLY, Paul. Furious protests at move to cement Togo ruling family's grip on power. BBC News, 24 July 2025. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9vj7xjxwypo> (accessed 09/02/2026).

¹⁶ AIKINS, Enoch Randy. Benin: Current Path. Pretoria: African Futures and Innovation Programme (AFI), Instituto para Estudos de Segurança (ISS Africa), 2025. Available in: <https://futures.issafrica.org/geographic/countries/benin/> (accessed 16/03/2026)

¹⁷ Guiffard, Jonathan (2023). Gulf of Guinea: Can the Sahel Trap Be Avoided? Institut Montaigne. Available in: <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/gulfguinea-can-sahel-trap-be-avoided> (accessed 12/01/2026)

the main opposition party from the upcoming presidential election¹⁸.

Togo is characterized by a long-standing institutional continuity under the Gnassingbé family; first under Gnassingbé Eyadéma (1967-2005) and later with his son, Faure Gnassingbé. This system, backed by the armed forces, has consolidated a power structure that limits political pluralism and alternation of power, through reforms that reinforce the concentration of power¹⁹. Economically, the country exhibits territorial imbalances. While the south and the port of Lomé function as modern logistics nodes, the north, especially the Savanes region, faces structural marginalization, unemployment, and lack of investment. This gap has an ethnic and social dimension; communities such as the Fulani perceive state neglect and face stigmatization that erodes trust in institutions²⁰. In July 2023, a JNIM attack killed at least twelve soldiers patrolling the village of Sankortchagou²¹, showing that militarization is failing to contain the spread but often serves to shield social control. At the same time, in the south, sectors of civil society and new generations denounce the lack of political openness and the persistence of the dynastic model, through demonstrations similar to those of Generation Z in Nepal or Morocco²².

Ghana has stood out for its relative stability and democratic alternation since 1992, consolidating a multi-party system that, although institutionalized, maintains strong political polarization among its main blocs. Economically, the country exhibits a deep territorial gap: while the south concentrates commercial, urban, and service activity, the rural north has lower development indicators and greater dependence on agriculture²³. This geographic divide coincides with key demographic and cultural factors. The north is

¹⁸ RICH, David. Nigeria's Benin rescue thwarts a coup, sends a warning to a volatile region. France 24, 2025. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20251210-nigeria-benin-rescue-thwarts-military-coup-sends-warning-to-volatile-region> (accessed 01/03/2026)

¹⁹ BOOTY, Nick; NEGOCE, Nara. Togo constitution: Parliament passes reforms likened to coup. BBC News, 20 April 2024. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68860091> (accessed 09/02/2026).

²⁰ GONZÁLEZ FRANCISCO, Luis A. The emerging jihadist phenomenon in the Republic of Togo. Terrorism Observatory, 12 April 2023. Available at: <https://observatorioterrorismo.com/actividades/el-emergente-fenomeno-yihadista-en-la-republica-de-togo/> (accessed 11/12/2025).

²¹ FUENTE COBO, Ignacio. X-ray of the jihadist threat in the Sahel. Bie3: IEEE Bulletin (Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies), n° 37, 2025, p. 412433. Available at: <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/iee/radiografia-de-la-amenaza-yihadista-en-el-sahel> (accessed 28/11/2025).

²² MELLY, Paul. Furious protests at move to cement Togo ruling family's grip on power. BBC News, 24 July 2025. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9vj7xixwypo> (accessed 09/02/2026).

²³ CABREJAS MARTÍNEZ, Paula. The jihadist threat in the Western Sahel expands to the Gulf of Guinea (Opinion Paper 91/2023). Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), 2023 Available at: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2023/DIEEE091_2023_PAUCAB_Sahel.pdf (accessed 25/11/2025)

inhabited by communities such as Fulbe pastoralist groups with cross-border networks connected to the Sahel, while the south is predominantly Christian²⁴. The use of English as an official language and its Christian majority act as sources of cohesion in the face of anti-Western narratives²⁵. However, pockets of instability persist, such as Bawku,²⁶ where local conflicts and arms trafficking constitute vulnerabilities that jihadism can exploit. To mitigate these risks, the state employs a decentralized security architecture based on territorial councils, military reinforcement on the northern border, and regional cooperation through the Accra Initiative²⁷.

The Gulf of Guinea has therefore become a strategic space within the security dynamics of West Africa. Its economic importance, its geographical position as a connection between the Sahel and the Atlantic, and the institutional vulnerabilities present in several of its states make it a conducive environment for the expansion of transnational threats, creating an environment in which various armed actors seek to establish new areas of influence. According to the *2025 Global Terrorism Index*, Togo reached its highest level of terrorist impact since the index's inception, ranking 24th globally, while Benin also recorded a significant increase in violent incidents in its northern regions, ranking 26th globally. In contrast, Ghana ranks 100th in the index, reflecting a very limited impact of terrorist activity on its territory, its position is even below that of European countries with low levels of terrorism, such as Finland (72nd place) or Iceland (95th).²⁸

²⁴ Eric Rega Christophe Bayala, Mirjam Ros-Tonen, Terry Sunderland, Houria Djoudi & James Reed (2023) Farmer-Fulani pastoralist conflicts in Northern Ghana: are integrated landscape approaches the way forward?, *Forests, Trees and Livelihoods*, 32:2, 63-89 Disponible en: https://www.ciforcrf.org/publications/pdf_files/articles/ABayala2301.pdf (accessed 03/12/2025)

²⁵ DE BRUIJNE, Koen; COURTRIGHT, Jackie; YARO, Dauda S.; ELLIS, George; MENSAH, Philip N. K. A.; KHALFAOUI, Mounia; TANKO, Emmanuel. A beacon of democracy? How hyper-political competition increases the risk of violent extremism in Ghana (CRU Report). Clingendael Institute, 2024. Disponible en: <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/ghana-beacon-democracy> (accessed 14/12/2025)

²⁶ SUMMERS, Marta. Jihadist activity in the Maghreb and the Sahel, February 2023. Terrorism Observatory, 10 March 2023. Available at: <https://observatorioterrorismo.com/analisis/actividad-yihadista-en-el-magreb-y-el-sahel-febrero-2023/> (accessed 16/03/2026).

²⁷ Bernard, Aneliese (2021). Jihadism is spreading to the gulf of guinea littoral states, and a new approach to countering it is needed. Modern War Institute. Disponible en: <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/jihadism-is-spreading-to-the-gulf-of-guinea-littoralstates-and-a-new-approach-to-countering-it-is-needed/> (consultado 20/11/2025)

²⁸ INSTITUTE FOR ECONOMICS & PEACE. *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*. Sydney, March 2025. Available at: <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/global-terrorism-index/> (accessed 09/11/2025).

Strategic Routes

Terrorist groups active in the Sahel have demonstrated a remarkable capacity for territorial adaptation. As military pressure increases in certain areas, these groups tend to move towards areas where state presence is more limited or where there are strategic opportunities to expand their support networks, and the border regions between the Sahel and coastal countries offer precisely these conditions. In recent years, various jihadist organisations linked to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have intensified their activities in southern Burkina Faso²⁹, facilitating their approach to the borders of Benin, Togo, and Ghana. From these areas, terrorist groups have carried out incursions, attacks on security posts, and operations aimed at establishing logistical networks within the territory of coastal States³⁰. This phenomenon reflects a gradual expansion strategy that seeks to consolidate cross-border corridors between the Sahel and the Atlantic coast.

To understand the differences in the intensity of jihadist expansion between Benin, Togo, and Ghana, it is essential to analyse the geostrategic value of the territory, which these organisations exploit for illicit activities, particularly through the control of strategic transit routes. The advance towards the Gulf of Guinea has not taken the form of as a visible invasion, but as a gradual displacement that takes advantage of historical mobility corridors that connect the Sahel with the coast. One of the most important are transhumance corridors used for centuries by herders and traders to move livestock and goods between the Sahara, the Sahel, and coastal regions. Following the launch of French counter-terrorism operations in Mali in 2013, several armed groups began to move south along these routes. This movement was detected precisely along these corridors that connect southern Algeria and the Sahel with forested areas near the littoral states, spaces where fighters could temporarily withdraw during military operations in the Sahel³¹. Knowledge of the terrain itself facilitates such movement, as many combatants

²⁹ LÓPEZ MARTÍNEZ, Alejandro. Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso: Redefining Alliances in the West African Geopolitical Landscape (IEEE Opinion Paper 68/2024). Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), 2024. Available at: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2024/DIEEEO68_2024_ALELOP_Sahel.pdf (accessed 09/12/2025).

³⁰ FUENTE COBO, Ignacio. X-ray of the jihadist threat in the Sahel. Bie3: IEEE Bulletin (Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies), nº 37, 2025, p. 412-433. Available at: https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieeee/radiografia_de_la_amenaza_yihadista_en_el_sahel (accessed 28/11/2025).

³¹ GARRIDO GUIJARRO, Óscar. The expansion of jihadism from the Sahel to the coastal countries of the Gulf of Guinea (IEEE Analysis Document 32/2024). Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), 2024. Available at: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2024/DIEEEA32_2024_OSCGAR_Yihadismo.pdf (accessed 04/01/2026).

come from local communities accustomed to using these seasonal mobility routes for trade or transhumance.

These corridors cross areas where state presence is very limited and where borders function more as administrative markers than as real barriers. In practice, they directly connect Burkina Faso with northern Benin and Togo. A particularly important point is the Cinkassé area, on the border between Togo and Burkina Faso, which functions as a regional crossroads where trade routes and networks of arms, fuel, or livestock trafficking converge. Additionally, in recent years there has been an increase in the arrests of Fulani herdsmen who were also alleged to be jihadists³². In these spaces, state control is limited and the informal economy dominates daily activity, which is why they have been described as "crossroads conducive to business", that is, locations where informal trade and illegal activities can develop relatively easily³³. For terrorist groups, this is especially useful, as it allows movement between different countries using routes that have been operating as regional trade circuits for decades.

Added to this factor is the presence of large forest areas that function as natural refuges. In West Africa there is a very extensive network of protected areas spread between the countries of the Gulf of Guinea and the Sahel. Many of these reserves are located near international borders and have limited surveillance. In total, some 188 are located less than ten kilometres from a border, which makes them particularly useful spaces for crossing from one country to another without being detected. These areas offer vegetation cover, little state presence, and large unpopulated areas, characteristics that facilitate their use as hiding places³⁴, travel routes, or training grounds³⁴.

The most important case is the complex formed by the national parks of W, Arly, and Pendjari, known as WAP,³⁵ an extensive protected area shared between Benin, Burkina Faso, and Niger. This region has become one of the main refuge areas for armed groups

³² GONZÁLEZ FRANCISCO, Luis A. The emerging jihadist phenomenon in the Republic of Togo. Terrorism Observatory, 12 April 2023. Available at: <https://observatorioterrorismo.com/actividades/el-emergente-fenomeno-yihadista-en-la-republica-de-togo/> (accessed 09/02/2026).

³³ Bernard, Aneliese (2021). Jihadism is spreading to the gulf of guinea littoral states, and a new approach to countering it is needed. Modern War Institute. Disponible en: <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/jihadism-is-spreading-to-the-gulf-of-guinea-littoralstates-and-a-new-approach-to-countering-it-is-needed/> (accessed 30/11/2025)

³⁴ BROTTM, Leif (2022). Jihad Takes Root in Northern Benin. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. Disponible en: <https://acleddata.com/2022/09/23/jihad-takes-root-in-northern-benin/> (accessed 08/01/2025)

³⁵ The W-Arly-Pendjari (WAP) complex includes the W National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and is one of the largest wildlife conservation areas in West Africa.

operating in the Sahel. Benin's forests have been repeatedly used as a place of retreat after military operations in Burkina Faso, allowing various armed groups to reorganise without detection³⁶. The WAP complex is very large: it covers more than 30,000 square kilometres, (an area comparable to Belgium). The rugged terrain, the density of vegetation, and the proximity of several borders make the area function as an operational base from which to launch attacks against different countries. This type of environment also facilitates other illegal activities that serve to finance armed operations. Arms trafficking is especially frequent in this area, where different armed groups take advantage of the terrain and the lack of surveillance to move weapons between neighbouring countries. Several organisations linked to both Al Qaeda and the Islamic State operate in this region, including Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Ansaroul Islam (AI).³⁷

This geographical configuration affects each Gulf of Guinea State differently. Benin has become one of the countries hardest hit by violence linked to Sahel-based armed groups. Many of the attacks in recent years are concentrated precisely in areas near the WAP complex, where fighters can easily cross from Burkina Faso and return to forested areas after attacks. The number of deaths related to Islamist attacks in Benin has increased significantly in recent years, with most incidents concentrated on its northern border. In Benin, JNIM seeks to turn the WAP into a buffer zone, taking advantage of the abundant forests that cover the region³⁸. This strategy not only facilitates their mobility and hiding place but has also resulted in a significant number of deaths among the local population, reflecting the lethal impact of their operations in the area.

Togo has also suffered a progressive increase in attacks, especially in its northern region. In recent years, violent incidents have gradually spread into the interior of the country, indicating a process of territorial expansion from the border with Burkina Faso. One example was the attack in June in the town of Bonzougou, in the north-central part of the

³⁶ BRUIJNE, K. «Conflict in the Penta-Border Area: Benin's Northern Jihad from the Perspective of its Neighbours», Clingendael. Disponible en: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/conflict-in-the-penta-border-area.pdf> (accessed 14/01/2025)

³⁷ OGUNADE, Fola. West African wildlife sanctuary becomes a hub of insecurity. ISS Today, March 4, 2025. Available at: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/west-african-wildlife-sanctuary-becomes-a-hub-of-insecurity> (accessed 09/12/2025).

³⁸ FUENTE COBO, Ignacio. X-ray of the jihadist threat in the Sahel. Bie3: IEEE Bulletin (Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies), nº 37, 2025, p. 412-433. Available at: <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieee/radiografia-de-la-amenaza-yihadista-en-el-sahel> (accessed 28/11/2025).

country, where an improvised explosive device caused several civilian casualties after being activated as a vehicle passed by³⁹. This type of attack shows that armed groups are exploring new areas of operation along the same mobility routes that connect the Sahel with the north of Togo.

In Ghana, the intensity of attacks is lower, in part, because of its role as a logistical rear base. Certain areas of northern Ghana have become rest and supply areas for terrorists operating in the Sahel, who travel there to obtain everything from fuel and motorcycles to medical treatment before returning to the operational areas⁴⁰. These dynamics are intertwined with informal economies, where the smuggling of stolen cattle in Burkina Faso serves to finance essential supplies in regional markets⁴¹. However, this relative calm does not hide deep vulnerabilities. The development gap between the prosperous south and a rural north marked by poverty and lack of infrastructure creates a dangerous breeding ground. In hotspots such as Bawku, ethnic tensions and cross-border dynamics have forced the government to militarise the area to prevent these hotbeds of local instability from becoming the primary gateway for jihadist expansion.

Beyond from these land routes, the advance towards the Gulf of Guinea also has an economic dimension linked to maritime routes. The region has acquired growing importance within international drug trafficking networks, especially in the transport of cocaine from Latin America to Europe, various estimates suggest that around 40% of the drugs that reach the European continent do so through West Africa⁴². The shipments usually land in countries in the Gulf of Guinea such as Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, or Ivory Coast, from where they continue northward by land north across the Sahel until they reach the Mediterranean. The limited maritime and land surveillance capacity in several States in the region facilitates such activities and makes the shores of

³⁹ ADF STAFF. Terror attacks increase in Togo as Sahel extremists encroach. ADF Magazine, 23 de julio de 2024. Disponible en: <https://adf-magazine.com/2024/07/terror-attacks-increase-in-togo-as-sahel-extremists-encroach/> (accessed 10/01/2026).

⁴⁰ ADF STAFF. Northern Ghana emerges as base for Sahelian terrorist organizations. ADF Magazine, November 2024. Available at: <https://adf-magazine.com/2024/11/northern-ghana-emerges-as-base-for-sahelian-terrorist-organizations/> (accessed 10/01/2026).

⁴¹ CLINGENDAEL INSTITUTE. How stolen cattle links Ghana to the jihadist conflict in the Sahel. Clingendael, year not indicated. Available at: <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/how-stolen-cattle-links-ghana-jihadist-conflict-sahel/> (accessed 09/02/2026).

⁴² Chandra, Yashasvi: "Illicit Drug Trafficking and Financing of Terrorism", Journal of Defence Studies, Vol. 14 nº 1-2, (January-June 2020). pp. 69-9.1 Disponible en: <https://idsa.in/publisher/journal-of-defence-studies/illicit-drug-trafficking-and-financing-of-terrorism-the-case-of-islamic-state-al-qaeda-and-their-affiliate-groups> (Accessed 08/02/2026)

the Gulf of Guinea particularly attractive entry points for criminal networks⁴³.

In addition, piracy is a major security problem in the region. For years, the Gulf of Guinea has been considered one of the most dangerous maritime areas in the world for commercial shipping. Attacks on merchant ships, crew kidnappings, and cargo theft have become recurrent practices in certain areas of the coast. These activities are often linked to criminal networks operating both at sea and on land, taking advantage of states' constraints to monitor large areas of their territorial waters⁴⁴.

The control of these illicit economies has become an important objective for the various terrorist groups operating in the Sahel. Since approximately 2020, some of them have directed part of their operations towards coastal countries with the intention of influencing these routes and benefiting from the revenues they generate⁴⁵. In the Sahel, illegal economies related to drug trafficking, human trafficking, or smuggling are part of a parallel economic system that finances armed activities and allows jihadist structures to be sustained over time.

⁴³ IBÁÑEZ GÓMEZ, Fernando. Maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea. *Journal of Mediterranean International Studies*, 2014. Available at: <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=4900469> (Accessed 09/02/2026)

⁴⁴ BRUN, Jean-François. The fight against cocaine trafficking in the Caribbean and West Africa: a European issue. Doctoral thesis in Political Science, University of the West Indies, 2019, p. 135. Available in: <https://www.theses.fr/2019ANTI0395/document> (accessed 17/03/2026).

⁴⁵ DELGADO URRUTIA, Francisco. The incidence of maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea on Spain. *UNISCI Journal*, nº 64, 2024. Available at: <https://www.unisci.es/wpcontent/uploads/2024/01/UNISCIDP64-8DELGADO.pdf> (accessed 09/02/2026).

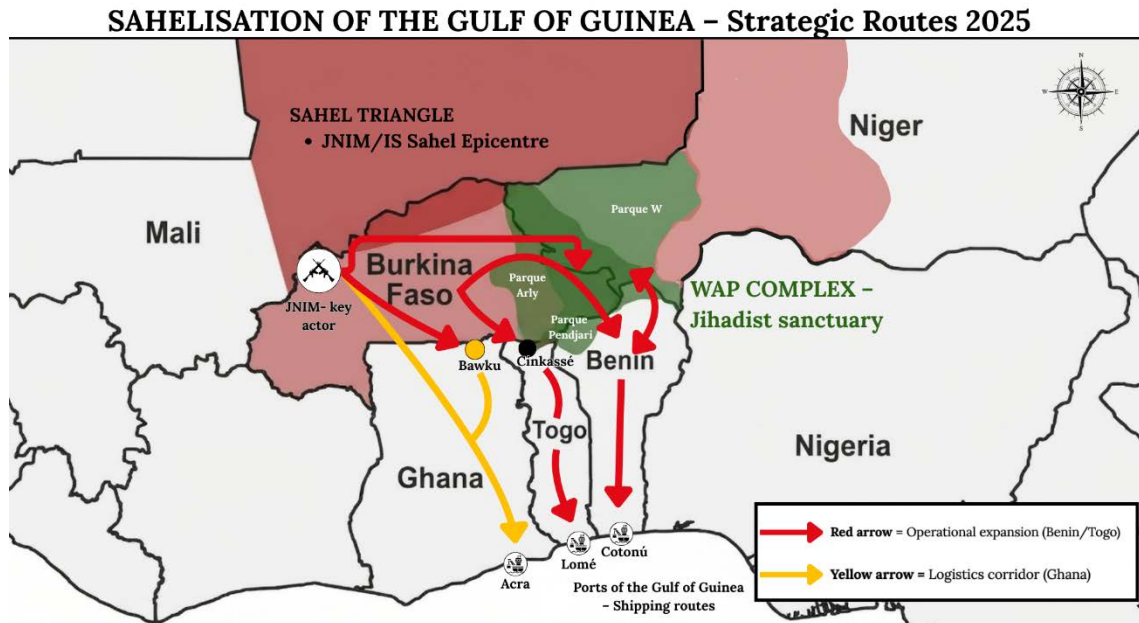


Figure 3. Strategic routes

Source: Compiled by the author.

Conclusions

The higher incidence of jihadist violence in Benin and Togo than in Ghana, despite sharing a border with Burkina Faso, is due less to differences in state capacity than to the different role that each country plays within the territorial strategy of the groups operating in the Sahel. Benin and Togo now function as zones of operational expansion, while Ghana plays a role closer to a logistical rear base. Insurgent pressure that starts from the south of Burkina Faso finds in northern Benin and Togo a particularly favourable environment to test new areas of expansion: peripheral territories with limited state presence, highly permeable borders, and direct proximity to key mobility corridors and natural sanctuaries such as the W-Arly-Pendjari complex.

These conditions enable groups such as JNIM to alternate between raids, establish local networks, and use forested areas as operational bases. Ghana, on the other hand, offers an environment less suitable for this type of direct presence and more useful as a space for supply, transit, and rest within the regional networks that sustain the insurgency. The difference, therefore, does not reflect any inherent Ghanaian immunity to the phenomenon, but a functional distribution of territory within the conflict economy. Where the terrain and social conditions allow for progress, armed groups expand their violent

activities; where stability is advantageous, they maintain a more discreet presence and avoid open confrontation that would put their networks at risk.

This pattern also makes it necessary to nuance how the jihadist threat in the region is understood. Expansion towards the Gulf of Guinea does not necessarily depend on the creation of a visible state project or the proclamation of a caliphate as occurred with the Islamic State in 2014. That experience showed that formal territorial control can provide a strong symbolic and political capacity, but it also makes these actors a direct target of international intervention. In the Sahelian context, a strategy based on the gradual control of cross-border corridors, illicit economies, and peripheral territories can be just as effective in sustaining the insurgency without assuming the costs of administering a state. In a region that connects the Sahel with the Atlantic and with key trade routes to Europe, the domination or infiltration of these networks already produces significant strategic effects: it finances armed groups, weakens states and consolidates areas where state authority becomes increasingly fragile.

The problem, therefore, is not limited to the eventual territorial conquest of coastal states but rather lies in the progressive conversion of the strip connecting the Sahel with the Gulf of Guinea into a space where terrorist networks, illicit economies, and institutional weakness reinforce each other; in other words, in a process of Sahelization of the Gulf of Guinea. In this scenario, the impact of the conflict is not limited to the interior of West Africa but ends up projecting towards Europe through the same commercial, migratory, and criminal routes that connect both regions.

Audry Gadea Fernández Lévèder

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