

Responding to State “Fragility” in Coastal West Africa

May 25, 2022

In April 2022, the Biden Administration [identified](#) part of coastal West Africa—Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo—as a priority region pursuant to the 2019 Global Fragility Act (GFA, Title V of Division J, P.L. 116-94). [U.S. military officials](#) and some [Members of Congress](#) have expressed concern over a southward expansion of Islamist insurgent violence from the neighboring Sahel region, centering on Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (see [Figure 1](#)). Benin and Côte d’Ivoire have been hardest hit, recording at least two dozen attacks since 2020, many targeting military personnel near their northern borders. Togo has [suffered](#) two attacks on northern security outposts since late 2021. Ghana and Guinea have not recorded attacks to date.

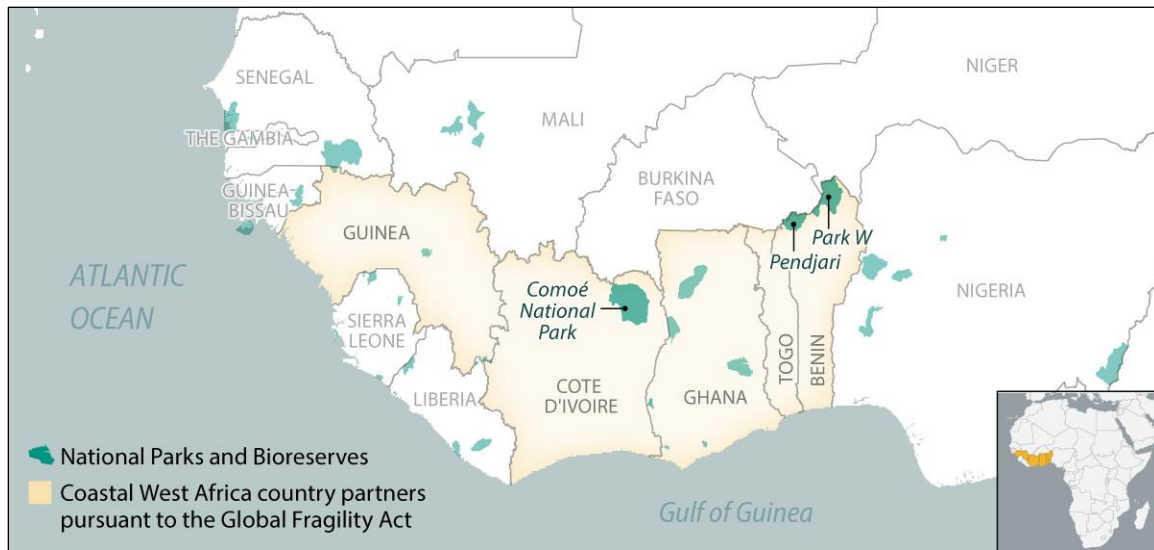
Analysts have attributed most of these attacks to Sahel-based affiliates of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State that have [moved south](#) to procure supplies and seek refuge, including in wildlife preserves in northern Benin and Côte d’Ivoire. Some [warn](#) that armed groups may expand their presence by exploiting local tensions and grievances, extending approaches pioneered in the Sahel. Disputes between [pastoralists and farmers](#), along with [anger at security force abuses](#), have reportedly driven extremist recruitment elsewhere in West Africa.

Governance challenges may heighten coastal states’ vulnerability to conflict. Guinea is under [military rule](#) following a 2021 coup. Togo’s president, in office since 2005, is among Africa’s longest-serving leaders; his government [restricts](#) civic space. Benin, previously viewed as a regional democratic leader, has experienced [rapid backsliding](#) under its current president. Côte d’Ivoire’s president won a constitutionally dubious third term in a [violent 2020 election](#). [Ghana](#) is widely considered one of Africa’s strongest democracies, though corruption and intercommunal disputes are persistent challenges. In May 2022 congressional testimony, the Assistant Secretary of State for Conflict and Stabilization Operations emphasized the need to “[strengthen democratic and responsive governance](#)” in the region.

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Figure I. Coastal West African GFA Priority Countries

Source: CRS. Boundaries from State Department and UNEP-WCMC and IUCN, Protected Planet: World Database on Protected Areas and World Database on Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures.

Coastal governments have strengthened military deployments along their borders and expanded regional security cooperation. In 2017, Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo launched the Accra Initiative, a mechanism to facilitate intelligence sharing, military training, and operational coordination. In Benin, park rangers have flushed militants out of protected areas amid a “[blurring of lines between conflict and conservation](#).” [Resource constraints](#), divergent priorities, and a [wave of military coups](#) have undermined regional counterterrorism efforts. West African leaders [agreed](#) to mobilize \$1 billion for regional counterterrorism efforts in 2019, but little funding [appears](#) to have materialized.

U.S. Assistance

Coastal West Africa’s selection as a GFA priority region follows an increase in U.S. peace and security assistance for the region. In 2020, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) launched the [Littorals Regional Initiative](#), which aims to foster resilience to extremism in the five coastal states, with Benin, Togo, and northern Ghana as initial focus areas. Projects [focus](#) on training local leaders to counter extremism, fostering social cohesion, and reducing farmer-herder tensions. The State Department [has expanded](#) its Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership program, which focuses on North Africa and the Sahel, to support some coastal states, and has provided assistance to security forces in the region through other regional and global programs. The Department of Defense has provided assistance to help counter drug trafficking and enhance maritime security under its global train-and-equip authority ([10 U.S.C. 333](#)).

Such assistance comprises a small share of overall U.S. aid for coastal West Africa, most of which focuses on health and economic development. For FY2023, the Administration has [proposed](#) \$143 million in bilateral assistance for Côte d'Ivoire, \$132 million for Ghana, \$44 million for Guinea, \$39 million for Benin, and \$500,000 for Togo. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) also has [programs](#) in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo.

Governance challenges have constrained some U.S. assistance. Guinea is subject to coup-related [legislative restrictions](#) on certain U.S. assistance. In 2021, citing democratic backsliding, the MCC stated that it would “[significantly reduce](#)” funding for Benin under a planned joint compact with Niger. Poor governance may pose dilemmas for GFA engagement even as it fuels the types of problems the GFA aims to address.

Congressional Considerations for GFA Engagement

Consideration of the Administration’s FY2023 budget request is ongoing. The GFA authorized the provision of assistance through two centrally managed funds, the Prevention and Stabilization Fund (\$125 million requested for FY2023) and the Complex Crises Fund (\$40 million requested); public budget materials do not disaggregate proposed GFA allocations by country. The request also describes some proposed bilateral assistance for coastal West African states as supporting GFA priorities. Congress may consider various questions as it funds and oversees increased U.S. engagement in the region, including the following:

- **Partnerships.** The [U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability](#) outlines a “compact-style” approach premised on partner governments’ commitment to good governance. How might the United States approach partnerships with undemocratic governments? What kinds of U.S. engagement might strengthen democratic governance? What developments in partner countries might prompt disengagement?
- **Prioritization.** What is the appropriate balance of U.S. assistance priorities? Insofar as poor governance and security force abuses [appear](#) to have driven extremist recruitment in the Sahel, what types of assistance might most effectively address such challenges in coastal states? What role might [security assistance conditionality](#) play in U.S. approaches?
- **Oversight.** Beyond biennial reporting to Congress as mandated in the GFA, how—and how frequently—should the executive branch consult with Congress to enable effective oversight? Inadequate embassy staffing has [posed challenges](#) for the management of U.S. security assistance in coastal West Africa. Does Congress have sufficient information on personnel and other resource needs to enable appropriate responses?
- **Coordination.** A 2020 audit of TSCTP assistance identified interagency coordination as a major challenge, [noting](#) “undefined roles and responsibilities, the lack of knowledge management, and staffing shortfalls.” How might GFA assistance be better administered? How, if at all, will GFA assistance be coordinated with U.S. stabilization efforts in the Sahel, and with other donors?

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