

THE JIHADIST INSURGENCY IN MOZAMBIQUE

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- The insurgency began in 2017 in the mostly Muslim northern Cabo Delgado province with unemployed and disgruntled youth joining or supporting the group.
- In 2019 the insurgents known as Ansar al-Sunna (ASWJ) or locally Al-Shabaab (no affiliation to the Somali group) have pledged alliance to the Islamic State (IS) and declared itself as the Islamic State Central Africa Province (IS-CAP).
- The insurgency had a major effect on the nation's economy with French energy company Total suspending its US$20-billion LNG project in the province.
- Rwandan troops aided by various southern African countries pushed out IS-CAP fighters from many of their strongholds. The jihadists have moved to the thick jungles and neighboring regions, from where they stage smaller hit-and-run attacks.
- Despite a decline in attacks in the northern Cabo Delgado province attacks continue in less frequency
- To draw attention to the declining jihadist insurgency, the IS-CAP may carry out an attack targeting foreigners or gas and oil projects, which were not directly targeted in the past.
- The US Department of State and many Western governments continue to advise against all travel to Cabo Delgado as well as in Nampula and Niassa provinces.

The jihadist insurgency in Mozambique began in 2017 in the mainly Muslim northern province of Cabo Delgado, by a group known as Ansar al-Sunna (ASWJ)--locally referred to as Al-Shabaab--although the group has no known connection to the Somali group of the same name.

The insurgency has escalated in the years that followed, with recruitment coming from poor unemployed and disgruntled youth over income inequality from the resource-rich province. While the government made billions, from the discovery of large gas fields and the rubies and gold mined there, the province remains impoverished. Combined with lack of a voice and abuse by government officials, police and soldiers, the insurgents gain local support mainly from the Mwani population, which has been marginalized since Mozambique's independence.

In 2019 the insurgents pledged alliance to the Islamic State (IS) and declared itself as the Islamic State Central Africa Province (IS-CAP). The declaration of allegiance to IS was a significant development in the conflict, as it marked the first time that a jihadist group in southern Africa had aligned itself with the Islamic State. It also raised concerns about the potential for the Islamic State to expand its influence and operations in the region.

Since pledging allegiance to IS, the ASWJ had increased its attacks in Cabo Delgado as well as in Nampula and Niassa provinces, targeting civilians and military personnel. The group's tactics include beheadings, kidnappings, and burning of villages, causing significant humanitarian and security concerns in the region. The group's attacks

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have resulted in over 3000 deaths and displacement of around 800,000 people.

The link to IS has also raised concerns about the potential for the group to receive support and resources from the global jihadist network. There have been reports of foreign fighters joining the ASWJ, although the scale of foreign involvement in the conflict remains unclear.

To combat the group, the Mozambican government contracted several private foreign security companies in its fight against the militants, including Russian Wagner Group, which has close ties to Moscow, but the group struggled to make progress. The estimated 200 Wagner personnel left Mozambique in November 2019, after suffering heavy casualties.

Wagner was replaced by the Dyck Advisory Group (DAG), a private South African military company providing aerial support to Mozambique's armed force. In early 2020, DAG announced that it was withdrawing from Mozambique, citing the lack of progress in the fight against the insurgency and the risk to its personnel. However, there have been reports that DAG continued to provide support to the Mozambican military in a limited capacity after its official withdrawal.

While the ASWJ's earlier attacks were confined to the far northeastern coastal districts, following its alliance to the Islamic State, the group's operations gradually spread south toward the regional capital Pemba.

The insurgency has also had significant implications for Mozambique's oil and gas industry. Cabo Delgado province is home to significant natural gas reserves, and foreign investors have invested billions of dollars in developing liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects in the region. However, the violence has resulted in delays and suspensions of projects, causing billions of dollars in losses.

In January 2021 French giant suspended its LNG project located in the Afungi peninsula after a series of insurgent attacks on the perimeter of the complex. The suspension of Total project was a significant blow to Mozambique's economy, as the project was expected to create thousands of jobs and generate significant revenue for the country. The violence has also forced other energy companies to reassess their operations in the region, which could lead to further delays and suspensions.

In addition to the economic impact, the insurgency has also had implications for regional security. The violence has spilled over into neighboring Tanzania, and there are concerns that it could spread to other countries in the region, leading to a wider destabilization.

A major IS-CAP attack took place in August 2020 when the group captured the strategic port city of Mocimboa da Praia-- their third attack on the city – that year. Unlike previous attacks, the militants showed major improvement in terms of both resources and tactics. The attack was launched with a large number of fighters, the largest gathering of insurgent yet seen in the conflict. The group also used coordinated attacks from land and sea, tactics never seen before.

The strategic city, located about 60 Km/ 37 miles south of the gas projects, and served as the main airport for international workers flying into the gas developments and its port is used for cargo deliveries.

The attack resulted in the death of dozens of people, including foreign workers. African Century Real Estate, which has several developments in the town, announced that it had evacuated some of its staff. Australia's RBR Group, which had a 50% interest in the

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668-bed Wentworth Accommodation Camp which sought to undertake training and labor-hire operations for the liquid natural gas project workforce, has also announced a suspension of operations.

The assault was unprecedented and marked a turning point in the fight against the insurgency, given the number of foreigners killed and companies affected. While it was not the first time that foreign contractors had been targeted, the scale of the assault has raised the international profile of the insurgency.

Despite repeated attempts by the Mozambican military to retake the town, it remained under the militants' control for over a year.

In late March 2021, nearly a year after the attack on Mocimboa da Praia, the IS-CAP staged another major attack during which the militants captured and held the port town of Palma for four days. The attack began hours after the French energy giant Total had announced it reached an agreement with the government of Mozambique to restart work on the nearby Afungi Peninsula LNG project.

Dozens of local civilians and security forces along with several foreigners were killed in the attack and much of the town's infrastructure, including a police station, food aid warehouses and number of foreign companies were targeted. The militants robbed several bank branches, including South Africa's Standard Bank and Banco Internacional de Moçambique (BIM), destroyed telecommunications infrastructure owned by Vodacom, and stole weapons from security forces. Following the attack, Total declared force majeure and evacuated all personnel from its $20 LNG project site.

The attack, so close to the LNG project site, again brought the international spotlight to the insurgency and calls for intervention.

Unlike many other insurgencies around the world, where former colonizers or other Western nations had intervened, military help arrived in Mozambique from Rwanda.

In July 2021, Rwanda deployed 1,000 troops, mainly well-trained Special Forces, to Mozambique to help fight the jihadist insurgency. Aided by some 3000 foreign forces soldiers from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) they stepped-up its activities against the IS-CAP

Government forces along with the Rwandan troops have recaptured the port town of Mocimboa da Praia – a year after it was captured by the militants--- as well as the strategic Awasse settlement following heavy fighting. While suffering casualties, most of the insurgents have fled to nearby forests.

The Rwandan intervention has been praised by some as a positive step towards addressing the security crisis in Mozambique. However, the intervention has also raised concerns about the broader implications of foreign military involvement in Mozambique's conflict.

Some analysts suspect that France – a former main colonizer in the continent-- had brokered the Rwandan military intervention to protect its financial interests, while avoiding being criticized for further military intervention in Africa.

At the same time, the intervention helped Rwanda's President Paul Kagame-- who had been in power for nearly three decades--to whitewash his human rights record back home. The Rwandan deployment, however, could escalate the conflict and lead to further destabilization in the region as well as the potential for mission creep, where the initial intervention leads to an extended military presence and involvement in Mozambique's internal affairs.

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The outlook for the Jihadist insurgency

While the deployment of regional forces in Cabo Delgado province has had a significant impact on the IS-CAP, the future of the jihadist insurgency in Mozambique remains uncertain, with the conflict showing no signs of abating.

It is essential for the Mozambican government and the international community to address the root causes of the conflict and to find a sustainable solution that addresses the grievances of the population in Cabo Delgado province and does not fuel the growth of jihadist groups.

According to a February 2023 UN report, the foreign military intervention disrupted the militants command structures and reduced their numbers from an estimated 2500 fighters just few years ago to an estimated 280 today. The group, however, has adapted to the changing conditions and currently engage in guerilla warfare. Many of the militants returned to their villages and even camps for displaced people, where they engage in recruiting new members.

The group is believed to work with about five groups that operate between Macomia, Muidumbe, Nangade, Mueda and as far to the southwest as the province's second-largest city, Montepuez. The group, break up and regroup, depending on their objectives. Those that engage security forces do so in larger groups of 30 to 40, while small groups of five to 10 can attack villages for supplies.

The surviving fighters are hardened combatants, able to move and strike strategically, relying on independent and well-established local networks for support, skills, and a flow of foreign fighters according to the UN report. As with other Jihadist terrorists' network around the globe, the group tactics have evolved with fighters now using Improvised Explosive devices (IEDs), with next steps will be developing suicide vests and car bombs.

While in early March 2023 the Italian energy services Saipem group announced that it has agreed to restart the LNG project in Mozambique for TotalEnergies in July. TotalEnergies, however, announced it would wait for an independent assessment of the humanitarian situation in the province it mandated to an expert in humanitarian action and human rights, before taking a decision on restarting operations.

Attacks continued in 2023 including the most recent on February 12 when militants attacked a military barracks in the village of Nairoto located in the Montepuez district of Cabo Delgado Province. At least five soldiers were killed in the attack and an unspecified number were wounded. The militants reportedly managed to take weapons and ammunition before destroying several military vehicles and set the barracks on fire. The attack prompted the precautionary evacuation of personnel from the nearby gold mining camp of Nairoto Resources Limitada, located about 15Km/ 9 miles northeast of the village.

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