

THE ISLAMIC INSURGENCY IN MOZAMBIQUE

The Way Forward

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INTRODUCTION

The insurgency of the Islamic State and other jihadist groups such as the Islamic-State affiliated Al Shabaab gained momentum in Mozambique in 2017, and these radical groups have raided Cabo Delgado and other provinces in Northern Mozambique ever since. The conflict between Mozambique's state security forces – the Mozambican Armed Defence Forces (FADM), and the Al Shabaab have displaced more than 250,000 people from Cabo Delgado and the nearby provinces of Mozambique, in a span of three years from 2017 to 2020 according to United Nations reports. Human Rights Watch reported that many international institutions such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and Doctors Without Borders had to suspend their operations in various provinces of Mozambique such as Macomia, Quissanga, and Mocimboa da Praia due to the security dilemma in the region. They also reported that around 1 million people in Mozambique were in critical need of aid and were isolated due to the ongoing military clashes, as of September 2020.¹

Al Shabaab (locally known in Mozambique as Al-Sunna wa Jama'a) is a Somalian-based jihadist group that possesses control over parts of Southern Somalia and Kenya. Al Shabaab has sworn allegiance to Al Qaeda's global anti-western jihadist propaganda and staunchly opposes secularism and westernisation in Africa. Its main objective is to overthrow the secular democratic structure and establish an Islamic State based on Sharia Law in the horn of Africa.²

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¹ Staff, "Mozambique – Events of 2020", *Human Rights Watch*, December 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/mozambique>

² "Al Shabaab", *Australian National Security Advisory – Australian Government*. <https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Listedterroristorganisations/Pages/Al-Shabaab.aspx>

However, there is no consensus among researchers about whether the Al Shabaab in Northern Mozambique is a faction of the Somalian-based Al Shabaab. On one hand, a few researchers say that the Al Shabaab in Cabo Delgado is a faction of the Somali group which aims at capturing the province due to its favourable geostrategic location close to the Indian Ocean. Capturing Cabo Delgado would facilitate drug and narcotic trafficking which would boost a major source of financing for the group. On the other hand, Frank Gardner, a BBC Security Correspondent, claimed that the Mozambican Al Shabaab group is not a faction of the Somali-based Al Shabaab. In fact, his report to the BBC claimed that the Mozambican Al Shabaab swore their allegiance to Al Qaeda's rival, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), in 2019. Gardner further claimed in his report that the Mozambican Al Shabaab went on to assume the title, "Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP)", another misleading aspect, according to him, as Mozambique was not even a part of Central Africa.^{3 4}

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE RISING INSURGENCY

Al Shabaab has found entry into the Cabo Delgado region of Mozambique due to multiple factors including:

- a. Government negligence in the region resulting in poor rates of employment and abject poverty;
- b. Poor administrative and public services;
- c. Corruption and impunity in the region;
- d. Weak and fallible security forces of Mozambique;
- e. Influence of foreign and domestic preachers on Mozambican youth.⁵

It is reported that the Cabo Delgado province in northern Mozambique is one of the poorest provinces in Africa, with over 67% of people being illiterate. Additionally, around 53% of Cabo Delgado's population is under the age of 18. We can then see how the Mozambican

³ Frank Gardner, "Mozambique : Why IS is so hard defeat in Mozambique", *BBC*, March 2021.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56597861>

⁴ Dr Paulo Faria, "The rise and root causes of Islamic insurgency in Mozambique and its security implication to the region", *IPSS Policy Brief – Volume 15 : March 2021*.
<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Policy-Brief-The-rise-and-root-causes-of-Islamic-insurgency-in-Mozambique-1.pdf>

⁵ Ibid

government has failed to capitalise on the human potential of these youngsters. More than 52% of youth in the region are illiterate. Although it is rich in oil and natural gas resources, the Mozambican government did not urge the multinational corporations settled in this region to create employment opportunities and welfare schemes for local youth. According to Mozambican National Statistics Institute, only close to 25,000 jobs were created in the energy sector while over 620,000 Mozambicans still relied on agriculture. The lack of job creation, as well as irregular urbanisation of the region, has pushed youngsters into poverty and unemployment, thereby pushing them into the hands of radical jihadist preachers.⁶

Another factor fostering the rampant rise in insurgency is the corruption and impunity of Mozambican officers as well as the human rights abuses committed by the state security forces. Joseph Sany, an analyst at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), claimed in his report, “Pathways to Peace in Mozambique”, that the battle between the Islamic State and the State Forces of the Mozambican government is not just an ideologically-driven battle, but is fuelled by the grievances and resentment of Mozambicans in underdeveloped and government-neglected regions such as the Cabo Delgado province. It was also revealed in his report that many government officials of Mozambique involve themselves in illicit activities such as drug-, gems-, and wildlife-trafficking. These officials are bystanders of human rights violations of multinational corporations, and they themselves are often involved in violence against Mozambican citizens in these regions. The weak justice system of the country fosters impunity among government servants and security forces. The state security forces committed mass human rights violations on internally displaced persons seeking refuge in Cabo Delgado through their counter-terrorism activities. Therefore, the violence committed by the state armed forces against commoners as well as heavy corruption and impunity among government personnel drove jihadist propaganda in Mozambique, especially in regions such as Cabo Delgado. The socioeconomic situation in Mozambique played a vital role in the insurgency of jihadist groups, who want to topple the existing political order and replace it with Sharia law;

⁶ Dr Paulo Faria, “The rise and root causes of Islamic insurgency in Mozambique and its security implication to the region”, *IPSS Policy Brief – Volume 15 : March 2021*.
<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Policy-Brief-The-rise-and-root-causes-of-Islamic-insurgency-in-Mozambique-1.pdf>

which, as preached to the victims of state-sponsored abuses by radical preachers, has the capability to improve the lives and welfare of poverty-stricken Mozambicans.⁷

COVID-19 AND LEGITIMISATION

It is to be noted that the government of Mozambique – with the help of development partners such as the United Nations, the International Labour Organization, and a few partner countries such as the U.S., U.K., and Germany – implemented a COVID-19 Social Protection Response programme that had identified about 1,582,179 beneficiaries that needed immediate attention. These beneficiaries were to receive cash transfers of 1500 Mt (US\$ 23.4) per month for a period of six months. While the scheme was vetted by the United Nations, it failed to address the weak public services and enforcement of the Mozambican government; and the increasing presence of jihadist groups such as Al Shabaab. The armed conflict between Al Shabaab and the state security forces in Northern Mozambique disrupted the implementation of the Covid response plan in provinces such as Cabo Delgado, which was in dire need of assistance and support from the government. At the same time, the Mozambican government failed to distinguish between households in impoverished provinces such as Cabo Delgado and those in urban and developed provinces such as the capital city of Maputo. The Social protection response plan included only around 64,766 households in Cabo Delgado while it identified around 84,507 households in the Maputo Province.⁸

It was reported by Amnesty International that Mozambican police used excessive force to contain the movement of Mozambicans who stepped out of their homes in search of food during the COVID-19 lockdown. More than 700,000 people in and around the Cabo Delgado region required humanitarian assistance, but the government failed to provide even basic amenities like food, water, and shelter to these internally displaced people. Grave human rights violations

⁷ Joseph Sany, “Pathways to Peace in Mozambique”, *United States Institute of Peace*, May 2021.
<https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/05/pathways-peace-mozambique>

⁸ “Reaching the most vulnerable in the social protection response to the COVID-19 crises in Mozambique : Opportunities and Challenges”, *International Labour Organization (ILO)*, October 2020.
https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---africa/---ro-abidjan/---ilo-lusaka/documents/publication/wcms_769723.pdf

were repeatedly committed by Mozambican Armed forces as well as the newly instituted Mozambique Rapid Intervention Unit. Many video and photographic evidence were released against such state forces who tortured and arbitrarily detained people who were allegedly connected to the jihadist rebel groups. Many of these suspects were internally displaced people who wandered in the region in search of food and shelter because of COVID-19 and repeated conflicts between Al Shabaab and state forces. Therefore, the inefficiency of the Northern Integrated Development Agency of the Mozambican government to nullify the negative effects of the pandemic in Northern Mozambique along with the flawed resource allocation of the government and the insurgency of Islamist groups in Northern Mozambique isolated provinces like Cabo Delgado from the rest of Mozambique, and pushed it into the hands of Islamic insurgents like the Al Shabaab.⁹

MOZAMBIQUE’S ARMED FORCES AND THEIR CAPACITIES

The internationalisation of the Al Shabaab became a huge problem for the Mozambican Armed Forces as these militant groups gained the support of Islamic State (IS) fighters in Eastern Africa, and religious leaders mobilised religious support and militarily trained Al Shabaab youth to participate in armed conflicts. These militants are highly trained and equipped with state-of-the-art military equipment such as assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades along with bullet-proof jackets and night-vision goggles. The March 2021 raid by Al Shabaab under the banner of the Islamic State into the Palma province near Cabo Delgado was an instance that highlighted the weakness of the Mozambican Security Forces compared to the insurgent armed forces. It was reported that the IS fighters effortlessly breached the security and terrorised households during their Palma raid. Many analysts observed that the tactics of the IS were different compared to those of their rival group, Al Qaeda. IS is known for its violent, bloodthirsty raids and its only intention is to terrorise the communities they’re operating from. This is unlike the reformed Al Qaeda after their loss in Iraq, which started focusing on building cooperation and support with the local communities along with their agenda of terrorising people. One could say that Al Qaeda adopted a selective terrorising approach to legitimise their hold in the regions they operate from, similar to the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Hamas in

⁹ Staff, “Mozambique 2020”, *Amnesty International*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/southern-africa/mozambique/report-mozambique/>

Palestine. With that being said, many visuals of IS fighters slaughtering young children plagued the internet which terrorised many communities in Northern Mozambique. Considering that the IS fighters show no mercy to the civilians, a greater amount of pressure is created on the government of Mozambique to protect its citizens from the constant raids of the Islamic State.¹⁰

In August 2020, Mozambique's Minister of Defence, Jaime Neto, called for a press release where he repeatedly tried reaffirming to his citizens that the Mozambican Armed Forces were efficient and equipped well enough to fend off an Islamic insurgency. However, he did confess that the government needed help from a few international partners for maritime and cross-border surveillance to restrict the entry of Islamic State fighters from Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, and other Eastern African states. Although Jaime Neto denied the role of mercenaries in assisting the FADM in public, it is only fair to accept the fact that the Mozambican government had requested the military intervention of Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group and South African-based mercenaries from the Dyck Advisory Group (DAG), in 2019, to assist the FADM and other state forces against the IS fighters in Cabo Delgado.¹¹

It is also reported that countries such as the United States have pledged support to Mozambique by helping them patrol the state's coastline to block narcotic trade. France is also assisting the maritime forces of Mozambique through its base in Mayotte in the Indian Ocean, which is reported to be around 500 km from the Pemba region of Northern Mozambique. South Africa has also invested in the insurgency in Mozambique by sending private mercenaries and closely watching the overall security situation in the North of the country. This could be partially due to South Africa's self-interest as a collapse of Mozambique's government would expose South African borders to heavy Islamic threats. As is the case with the United States and France, which have invested heavily in the Natural Gas reserves in the Cabo Delgado region of Mozambique. In April 2021, the French energy company, Total, had to suspend operations of

¹⁰ Frank Gardner, "Mozambique : Why IS is so hard defeat in Mozambique", *BBC*, March 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56597861>

¹¹ Dr Paulo Faria, "The rise and root causes of Islamic insurgency in Mozambique and its security implication to the region", *IPSS Policy Brief – Volume 15 : March 2021*. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Policy-Brief-The-rise-and-root-causes-of-Islamic-insurgency-in-Mozambique-1.pdf>

its plant in Cabo Delgado due to the deteriorating security scenario in the region, thereby losing out on Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) projects worth US\$20 billion. France has been committed to fending off maritime threats in the Indian Ocean Natural Gas reserves of Mozambique ever after Total's *force majeure* to safeguard its investments. Therefore, one can argue that these countries are heavily invested in the security situation in this region to safeguard their economic interests.¹²

Frank Gardner, in his report to the BBC, further elucidated the military training and support facilitated to the FADM by the Pentagon along with Portugal, which was the former colonial power in Mozambique. It was reported that the Pentagon had deployed a small number of their Green Beret Special Forces trainers to aid the FADM while Portugal pledged to send a small proportion of their troops to Mozambique to help the FADM battle against Al Shabaab. Therefore, while the Mozambican government can claim that they have regulated the involvement of external forces by paying heed to the predictions of experts – such as the IISS research fellow, Benjamin Petrini about the political instability and intensification of conflict in the advent of increased involvement of foreign military forces – Minister Jamie Neto's claim of the FADM being equipped to combat the insurgent groups is not credible. The FADM and other Mozambican armed forces cannot handle the insurgency by themselves and need help from other international stakeholders to address the issue of insurgency in their country.¹³

A MULTIDIMENSIONAL SOLUTION

The Islamist insurgency in Mozambique, especially in its Northern provinces started prevailing due to the disparity in governance and differential treatment of southern provinces such as Maputo and northern provinces such as Cabo Delgado. The latter is situated about 1500 miles from Maputo, the capital city of Mozambique, therefore leaving it vulnerable to neglect at the hands of the Mozambican government, which found it difficult to maintain administrative control over its northern provinces. The poor decentralisation of governmental functions

¹² Joseph Sany, "Pathways to Peace in Mozambique", *United States Institute of Peace*, May 2021. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/05/pathways-peace-mozambique>

¹³ Frank Gardner, "Mozambique : Why IS is so hard defeat in Mozambique", *BBC*, March 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56597861>

resulted in abject poverty and high rates of unemployment in Northern Mozambique. The government yet again failed in its responsibilities when investments in the energy resources of these provinces did not correspond to the rise in the income and living conditions of its citizens. These multinational corporations did not create adequate employment opportunities and failed to offer welfare schemes and insurance to the residents. The culture of impunity and corruption of government personnel in this region maligned the impression of the government even more in the eyes of the Northern Mozambicans. Their resentment and distress against the government were exploited by Islamist insurgents who preached that the resurrection of a political order based on Sharia law will resolve unemployment, poverty, and other such pressing issues of the civilians in the region. Therefore, the Mozambican government has to carefully identify the root causes of insurgency and resolve it accordingly; because a purely military plan of action against Mozambican insurgency could not have resolved the deep-rooted issue of insurgency and terrorism.

High-level diplomatic summits have to be arranged between various stakeholders of the Mozambique security dilemma such as Eastern African Standby Forces, the SADC's organ on politics, defence, and security, ECOWAS, the United States, France, South Africa, and the United Nations, as suggested by Dr Paulo Faria.¹⁴ International stakeholders such as the United States and France have to collaborate with Mozambique's government to ensure that their MNCs in Mozambique generate adequate employment opportunities for the Mozambicans in the region as well as invest in the country's human capital by training Mozambicans through literacy workshops and awareness programs. The SADC's regional military cooperation, especially South Africa's cooperation is imperative in thwarting the fighters of the Islamic State as heavy involvement of foreign military troops will exacerbate the security dynamics of the region. Through keen observation, one could also infer that the involvement of foreign forces in a region creates an inevitable dependency for the host nation, so much so that the withdrawal of foreign troops induces a power vacuum that is hard for the host nation's security forces to seal, thereby resulting in an insurgency. Taliban's re-emergence in Afghanistan after

¹⁴ Dr Paulo Faria, "The rise and root causes of Islamic insurgency in Mozambique and its security implication to the region", *IPSS Policy Brief – Volume 15 : March 2021*.
<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Policy-Brief-The-rise-and-root-causes-of-Islamic-insurgency-in-Mozambique-1.pdf>

the withdrawal of the NATO forces is an example to support this theory. Therefore, regional military cooperation is essential for containing the violence of fighters affiliated with the Islamic State and Al Shabaab.

At the same time, there should be a well-established connection and coordination between the SADC and Mozambique. The recent incident where Rwanda unilaterally sent 1000 soldiers into the northern region of Mozambique without informing Maputo was viewed by many as Rwanda's military intervention into Cabo Delgado. This sent tremors into Maputo as it caused a division in political consensus.¹⁵ Therefore, it is imperative for the SADC and Mozambican government to establish clear channels of communication and follow the same plan of action, as achieving political stability is a vital step to eradicate insurgency from the state.

Mozambique's government should invest in the education and healthcare of Mozambican youth as the country has one of the highest percentages of population below the age of 18 years. With the right education and employment opportunities in Northern Mozambique, these provinces could experience higher rates of employment and a better standard of living. Through this, the people's support for the Islamic State can be ruptured. The Mozambican government and its partners can exploit the Islamic State's violent terrorising approach in the northern communities. Through adhering to bloodthirsty approaches during attacks and raids, the Islamic State is holding onto civilian support only through fear but not through respect and admiration. Therefore, if the government succeeds to take care of the welfare of civilians in the Northern provinces and winning their trust, the government forces have a high chance of inspiring a revolt among civilians against the insurgents, similar to how the Al-Qaeda was suppressed in Iraq in 2007. Therefore, counterterrorism and counterinsurgency measures will be effective only if the government secures the trust of its citizens, especially in Northern Mozambique.¹⁶

¹⁵ Borges Nhamirre, "Mozambicans divided over Rwandan deployment", *Institute for Security Studies (ISS)*, July 2021. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/mozambicans-divided-over-rwandan-deployment>

¹⁶ Frank Gardner, "Mozambique : Why IS is so hard defeat in Mozambique", *BBC*, March 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56597861>

CONCLUSION

The Mozambican government and its partners must implement all the aforementioned policies to thwart the deep-rooted insurgency in the region. Similar to those in Lebanon and Syria, the insurgency in Mozambique is also due to the unaddressed grievances of citizens against their government and its armed forces. Hence, the government must first legitimise its rule by winning over the people in these regions. Apart from the complex multidimensional solutions, the Mozambican government should also control corruption and punish government personnel who engage in illicit activities. The Mozambican justice system must be reformed so that the culture of impunity is eradicated.

Political stability and consensus on key issues are vital in combatting insurgency. Therefore, the government should make sure it has proper coordination with both internal as well as external agencies. Even a minor miscommunication has the potential to end up fuelling the growing insurgency in Mozambique, considering the current security situation and explosive political climate.