

## Al-Shabab in Mozambique: Taking Stock of an Insurgency Under Cover

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*Since the first attack in October 2017, Mozambique has been confronted with an extremist insurgency called Ansar Al-Sunna Wa Jamma (ASWJ), also known as Al-Shabab (not to be confused with Al-Shabab in Somalia). The alleged Jihadists targeted the Mozambican coastline and have carried out indiscriminate attacks in the Northern province of Cabo Delgado, with the capture of coastal towns Mocimboa Da Praia in 2020 and Palma in 2021 being important markers for the insurgents. The intense five-year conflict has resulted in 4000 people dead and 800 000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDP), roughly half of the province.<sup>1</sup> The identity of the insurgents has become subject for debate among policy makers and researchers, raising questions about whether the group is primarily a local insurgency or whether there are tangible links to Jihadism in other areas of Africa and the Middle East.*

Efforts to stem the insurgency have varied with the progression of the insurgency. As a lacking Mozambican security apparatus failed to counter the threat, President Nyusi followed up by hiring several Private Military Companies (PMC) in 2019 to fight the insurgents. With PMC's also proving unable to stem the insurgency, Mozambique requested assistance from Rwanda and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to conduct counterterrorism operations, and from the United States and the European Union to carry out Security Force Assistance missions. Although captured towns have now been reconquered by local and foreign armed forces, and Mozambican officials claim to have largely stemmed the insurgents, the violence appears far from over. Al-Shabab keeps retreating, regrouping,

adapting and has even temporarily spilled over into the Western Niassa province, the Southern Nampula province and near the Tanzanian border<sup>2</sup>, raising questions about spread of the insurgency to other areas on the African continent.

This policy brief outlines the conflict dynamics from a broad perspective, starting from 2017, when the first signs of Islamic State (IS) influence came to light, with the aim of increasing our understanding of the current situation. It does so by analysing the identity of Al-Shabab, considering both the local and Jihadi aspects of the insurgency, and mapping out the counterterrorism and SFA interventions in response to the threat, evaluating their effectiveness and implications. The brief demonstrates the complexity of the conflict and argues that there is a need for finding measures that are customized to the Mozambican context, that take into account deeper structural causes, as well as more short-term responses related to quelling the violence.

### AL – SHABAB'S IDENTITY

#### LOCAL GRIEVANCES AS THE FUNDAMENT FOR THE UPRISING

The disadvantaged politico – economic environment of the province Cabo Delgado is central to the rise of Al-Shabab. The province has been marginalised by the Mozambican government for the last decades.<sup>3</sup> Being one of the poorest provinces in the country, it lacks basic healthcare, education and jobs, with food insecurity being one of the most pressing issues.<sup>4</sup> Over the years the ruling Frelimo party has privileged the Christian population in

the country and the capital Maputo, overlooking the Muslim dominated Cabo Delgado and coastal regions of other Northern provinces,<sup>5</sup> in spite of the fact that President Nyusi himself was born in Mueda, Cabo Delgado.<sup>6</sup> Severe feelings of collective discontent among the Northern locals have served as a fertile recruitment basis for the extremist group.<sup>7</sup>

While the province has been ignored by local authorities, its natural gas fields, located on the Northern coastline, have attracted international attention. Since 2019, French oil company Total has operated a 20-billion-dollar LNG retraction project near the city of Palma, believed to be one of the biggest energy investment projects on the whole African continent. Exxon – an American oil company - had a similar project south of the Total project.<sup>8</sup> Total had to declare force majeure in April 2021 because of the degrading security situation.<sup>9</sup> Expanding maritime control through the capture of coastal towns: Mocimboa Da Praia in 2020 and Palma in 2021, has been one of Al-Shabab's force multiplying strategies, empowering them in the maritime area, where the Mozambican navy is lacking capacity, totalling approximately 200 personnel.<sup>10</sup> The local frustrations related to the dire socio-economic situation are further fuelled by this context, and thus facilitates recruitment strategies for Al-Shabab.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, in addition to the deteriorating economic situation in the province, both Mozambican and foreign armed forces have worsened the conflict by corruption practices and human rights abuses. Official reports state that the Forças Armadas de Defesa de Moçambique (FADM) have carried out indiscriminate interventions to fight the insurgents.<sup>12</sup> The armed forces have also prevented tens of thousands from leaving the province, in direct violation with international humanitarian law, as the government has a legal obligation to protect civilians under their control.<sup>13</sup> These incidents had important repercussions on the trust of local communities towards the administration and its (hired) security forces.

## JIHADISM AS A FACILITATING STRATEGY?

The current identity of Al-Shabab and the future of the conflict remain uncertain. The insurgents originally targeted government institutions such as police stations and army patrols and tried to antagonise foreign investors by making their gas extraction projects unworkable. The initial nature of the conflict resembled thus a major revolt, with insurgents waging war against the state and the lack of socio-economic opportunities in the province.<sup>14</sup> Since 2017, the insurgents incorporated Jihadi doctrine into the group's workings, becoming what observers have called Islamic State Mozambique (ISM). At that time, IS media vaguely confirmed that 'a contingent of the Mujahedeen' in Mozambique had joined the Islamic State Central African Province (ISCAP),<sup>15</sup> a province that allegedly consisted of ASWJ in Mozambique and ADF in the Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>16</sup>

Analysts agree that Al-Shabab operates very autonomously relative to the central structure of IS.<sup>17</sup> Although Al-Shabab officially pledged allegiance to IS in 2019, the operational connection to Islamic State cannot be fully proven, and the command and control relationship between both is unclear. A photo posted by pro-IS telegram channels in May 2018 claimed that the Mozambican Jihadists would express an official 'bayah' - a promise of loyalty to the leader of IS - Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, but no official pledge by ISM has ever circulated publicly.<sup>18</sup>

The connection between Al-Shabab and IS seems to be mostly based on two factors. On the one hand, military knowhow, such as the utilisation of sniper tactics, tactical military design, IED's (improvised explosive devices) and religious beheadings.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the use of Islamic State propaganda and social media to recruit new fighters, with IS claiming Al-Shabab's attacks through online media and Al-Shabab using IS flags when attacking.<sup>20</sup> Strategically, the 'IS-marketing' elevates the militants' status within the global Jihad movement and facilitates recruitment. Yet, while IS' support to Al-Shabab seems clear, the ideological connection to the IS remains uncertain, with few foreign fighters recruited and an inconsistent use of Arabic, as well as proof of important economic incentives to join the group.<sup>21</sup>

The latter aspects make it challenging to assess the extent of Islamic State's influence in Mozambique. Two preliminary conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, Al-Shabab pledging allegiance to IS in 2019 proved advantageous to IS's cause, since it has been trying to expand its presence in Africa to counteract the defeated caliphate in the Middle East.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, because of the lacking 'bayah', the pledge remains uncertain. Secondly, the statements from IS media created opportunities for Al-Shabab, increasing its visibility and recruitment possibilities.<sup>23</sup>

The complexity of the insurgent's identity and goals, both locally tinted and IS linked, have created divisions between, and within, circles of analysts. African experts tend to lean towards a local insurgency explanation,<sup>24</sup> whereas terrorism experts approach the Mozambican conflict from a global Jihadism point of view.<sup>25</sup> Policymakers generally do seem to agree however, that the local grievances mentioned earlier remain the main cause for the uprising of Al-Shabab as an insurgency.<sup>26</sup>

## RESPONDING TO THE THREAT

### THE ORIGINAL STRATEGY – AVOIDING INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION

Before 2019, President Nyusi was reluctant towards foreign assistance, declining offers from several African countries. Part of the Mozambican government's strategy was to label Al-Shabab as local bandits, not insurgents or terrorists, considering that the latter would attract massive international attention that could shed light on problematic governance issues.<sup>27</sup> In line with the strategy to make the conflict less visible, security forces attacked, arrested and expelled journalists to prevent media coverage on Cabo Delgado, resulting in both limited reporting about the insurgency and increased hostility towards the state institutions from the local population, who felt that their security concerns were ignored.<sup>28</sup>

However, the Mozambican government found itself unable to stem the militants with its local security forces, which suffered from considerable deficiencies in different areas. These deficiencies, in addition to the sheer size

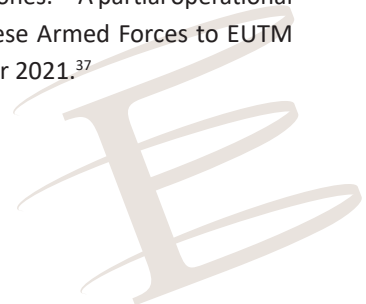
of the Mozambican armed forces of approximately 12 000 soldiers,<sup>29</sup> for a country the size of Pakistan, made foreign assistance necessary. Nyusi attempted to keep the insurgency under radar, by first asking private military companies (PMC): Russian WAGNER and South-African DAG, to intervene militarily in Cabo Delgado in 2019.<sup>30</sup> The PMC's were unable to suppress the insurgency though, as they lacked terrain knowledge and operational know-how. On top of this, they worsened the situation by committing several human rights violations, such as harassing journalists and aid workers,<sup>31</sup> and unlawfully killing unarmed civilians and non-combatants.<sup>32</sup> By 2021 both companies had (allegedly) disappeared from Mozambican soil.<sup>33</sup>

When both the Mozambican security forces and PMC's proved unsuccessful in stemming the insurgency, President Nyusi recognised Al-Shabab as Jihadi terrorist fighters.<sup>34</sup> This complete reversal in political narrative from the president, changing his primary perception from 'minor bandits' to 'international Jihadi terrorists', internationalised the conflict and opened the way for foreign assistance, while it downplayed local governance issues that led to the insurgency's uprising in the first place.

### THE CURRENT STRATEGY – FOREIGN INTERVENTIONS

Firstly, the U.S. Army launched a Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) program in March 2021, that evolved into its third cycle in January 2022.<sup>35</sup> The aim of the mission is for U.S. Special Forces (Green Berets) to strengthen the Mozambican military and its special operations capacities on the one hand, and educate the armed forces in human rights, law of armed conflict and medical training on the other hand.

Secondly, Portugal signed a 2021 – 2026 defence cooperation framework programme in May 2021, which includes training and education of special forces, marines and commandos, training ground-to-air cooperation and intelligence gathering with drones.<sup>36</sup> A partial operational handover from the Portuguese Armed Forces to EUTM troops started in 3 November 2021.<sup>37</sup>



Thirdly, a bilateral agreement between Maputo and Kigali resulted in the deployment of approximately 2000 Rwandan troops to conduct counterterrorism operations in Cabo Delgado, with the first troops arriving on 9 July 2021. The intergovernmental agreement was signed without Mozambican parliamentary oversight, which is a legal requirement, leading to speculations of the agreement being illegal.<sup>38</sup> In addition to the internal tensions within the Mozambican government, some politicians and analysts question Kagame's motivation to get involved in the conflict. According to Kigali, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle is Rwanda's main motivator, whereas the Mozambican opposition claims that Kagame is using his armed forces as diplomatic leverage to gain an advantageous position in LNG investment projects.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, the Rwandans have been effective in at least temporarily stemming the Islamic insurgency, recapturing Mocimboa Da Praia in 2021, in cooperation with the Mozambican armed forces. Their military CT has now resulted in an all-time low of Jihadi attacks.<sup>40</sup> While this decrease in attacks cannot solely be awarded to the Rwandans, they appear to have played a central role. Mozambican and Rwandan defence officials have signed an additional agreement on 11 January 2022, increasing cooperation between their security forces.<sup>41</sup>

Fourthly, the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM), consisting of eight countries, launched its first counterterrorism operations on 15 July 2021. The mission is aimed at supporting Mozambique through a variety of ways: neutralising the militants, restoring law and order, and providing humanitarian relief to the population.<sup>42</sup> Although the mission officially involves varied tasks, SAMIM has mostly consisted of military CT, much like the Rwandans. While initially successful, the mission is currently facing capacity and resource issues. The EU has already shown its willingness to contribute financially to SAMIM, with an initial 2 million in April 2022, yet it remains to be seen whether this will be enough to maintain the mission.<sup>43</sup>

Lastly, the European Union approved and initiated a non-executive European Union Training Mission (EUTM – Mozambique) on 3 November 2021 with a two-year

mandate. During this time, the strategic objective will entail capacity building of the Mozambican marines and commandos in Katembe and Chimoio, with the end goal being the creation of a Mozambican Quick Reaction Force that is able to efficiently and effectively respond to the crisis in Cabo Delgado. In particular, training includes: the achievement of military operational preparedness, specialised counterterrorism training and education on humanitarian and human rights international law.<sup>44</sup> The European Council has approved 45 million EUR of additional support for EUTM – Mozambique in April 2022, on top of the initial investment, which doubles the overall European Peace Facility support for Mozambique to 89 million EUR.<sup>45</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Al-Shabab remains a fundamentally local Jihadi insurgency, with alleged connections to regional IS structures. Similar to other conflicts in the Sahel and the Middle East, local grievances seem to be the most prominent reasons for the militant's initial revolt, with the Jihadi aspect being added to the conflict since 2017. The Mozambican insurgency thus entails heterogeneity, with both local and jihadi dimensions being part of its identity, function and structure.

Security Force Assistance missions from the EU and US will entail the medium-to-long-term solution for countering the Mozambican conflict, as these interventions are aimed at building up the country's resilience and capacity. EU and US influence in Mozambique, and Western influence at large, may decrease the risk of Maputo turning to the Kremlin or Beijing for support. However, as recent events in Mali have shown, SFA will remain a balancing act between imposing conditions and accepting local demands.

Until the Mozambican security apparatus is fully able to carry out effective CT operations autonomously, the Rwandan and the SADC military interventions remain important. Yet, although the Rwandan and the SADCs' counterterrorism strategy has pushed Al-Shabab into a defensive position, these successes are likely to be

short-lived if the root causes of the insurgency are not addressed. Increasing good governance, diminishing poverty through educational and economic opportunities, and disseminating a moderate version of Islam are important measures to prevent the expansion of the insurgents' breeding ground. The (almost) exclusive focus on enemy – centric military CT should be accompanied by a people – centric approach for an effective overall strategy. Dialogue and contextually adapted approaches have so far been lacking ingredients in the Mozambican security response. The main strategy towards tackling the Jihadists should entail a mixture between increasing local governance and socio – economic opportunities on the one hand, and disrupting Al-Shabab's operations on the other hand.

From a regional perspective, the connections to the DRC and regional IS structures, and the attacks spilling over into Tanzania, show that Al-Shabab is not only a problem for Mozambique, but poses a threat to broader economic activities and stability in the East African region as a whole. Zooming out from the region, the natural gas fields on the Mozambican coastline are likely to attract further international attention in the near future, given the vast implications on the world's energy supplies resulting from the war between Ukraine and Russia. With Western countries looking for energy alternatives to substitute Russian gas, and Mozambique having 1,4% of the entire world's gas reserves, interest from external actors is likely to increase.<sup>46</sup> With all the risks and opportunities that it may entail, Cabo Delgado is prone to remain a location for foreign interventions for some time to come.

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