



Mozambique Terrorist Insurgency: An Uncoordinated Response to a Looming Regional Crisis?

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Introduction

An Islamist insurgency in Mozambique's gas-rich northern Cabo Delgado province has been ongoing since October 2017 by the terrorist group commonly known as Al-Sunnah Wal-Jamaa (ASWJ), Ansar al-Sunna, or by locals as Al-Shabaab (unaffiliated to the Somali-based terrorist group). Militant activity in the region has so far killed more than 1300 civilians and soldiers, displacing approximately 220,000 civilians, and their attacks have increased in scope and frequency over the last year. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has done nothing to deter the Islamist militants operating in Mozambique's north-eastern Cabo Delgado province. ASWJ have increased their attacks against state security forces and infrastructure and continue with violent attacks against civilians.

Cabo Delgado is next to several untapped offshore natural gas reserves in the Rovuma Basin, and the inhabitants of the area have historically been disenfranchised, with high levels of social inequality and poverty, and limited social protections and opportunities for the citizens. This has made the area susceptible to internal and external organisations who finance terrorism and stoke local tensions, particularly amid an environment of renewed investment and planned development of mega-projects in the area, given the discovery of liquid natural gas (LNG) fields by multi-national companies, worth billions.

The government has been unable to successfully deter or neutralise the ongoing insurgency, particularly on the back of Cyclones Idai and Kenneth and the general election in 2019, exacerbated by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

Al-Sunnah Wal-Jamaa

The insurgents comprise young people who come from the region. Their strategy became clearer in recent messages wherein ASWJ pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, or commonly known as ISIS), in which they have stated the aim of their insurgency - to replace the Mozambican government with Sharia law (Isau, 2020). The group reportedly has links to the wider Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist organisation, who have claimed responsibility for a number of attacks undertaken in the region; however, there is limited evidence to support tangible links to ISIS.

ASWJ's has shifted from targeting state assets, including remote government and administrative buildings, police and security forces and checkpoints, to undefended local communities. Since its inception, attacks have been carried out with small arms, knives and machetes, suggesting limited financial resources and a lack of tactical sophistication. However, the group has gone from solely targeting, razing, and raiding entire villages and violent beheadings, to the recent shift in strategy to occupy villages. Further, a mixed strategy was deployed, including attempts at buying over the local communities by redistributing food within the villages. Notably, ASWJ have transformed into a well-coordinated and militarily equipped entity, threatening to destabilise the entire region (Zambara and Moyo-Kupeta, 2020). The attacks in 2020 have intensified, affecting inhabitants of Cabo Delgado.

An illustration of this is one of the terrorist group's more recent attacks on the 27th of June in 2020; insurgents launched an attack on Mocimboa da Praia town, a significant logistics hub for humanitarian relief and economic activity catering to the northern part of Cabo Delgado province and 60 kilometres south of the LNG project site (ACLED, 2020). ASWJ killed ten Mozambique Defence Armed Forces (FADM) soldiers and nine workers of the Total energy company sub-contractors, Fenix Construction Services (Biznews, 2020). This shift suggests that ASWJ may now be shifting from state and civilian actors as their sole targets, to including the wider LNG commercial interests in the area. While official casualty numbers are unclear, the FADM managed to respond to the attack, killing 11 insurgents (ACLED, 2020).

More recently, a significant part of Mocimboa da Praia has been under insurgent occupation as of the 11th of August after ASWJ attacked the previously government-held location. Government forces ran out of ammunition after fighting insurgents for several days (Comins, 2020). This capture and temporary defeat of government forces is a significant development as the capture of this town shows the evolving nature of the insurgency and the further encroachment on the natural gas complex. Further, it shows the rapid sophistication of the terrorist group, amid access to weaponry not seen before. This development could hint at greater transitional interests at play (Ibid.) Notably, ASWJ has historically been unable to occupy or hold sustained control over an area for long periods; thus, government forces will likely retake control over the area.

The province of Cabo Delgado is one of the most underdeveloped and disenfranchised provinces in Mozambique; further, it lies on the coast of the country, and is vulnerable to natural disaster and droughts, induced by climate change, as is evident by recent Cyclones Idai and Kenneth in 2019 (Brincat, 2020). Further,

while there is significant debate on the origins and causes of the insurgency; some scholars argue that material deprivation, including poverty, marginalisation, and youth disenfranchisement or opportunities may be the main underlying factors, and religion has been used as the cover for other motives (Morier-Genoud, 2020: 1). It could be argued that the social contract between the state and citizens in Cabo Delgado has broken down, as many basic services have been neglected. While other scholars argue that the insurgency is motivated by religious and ideological influences by preachers from Kenya and Tanzania, among other international influences, who are radicalising vulnerable youth (Ibid: 2).

Further, the recent discovery of natural gas in the area may have set up unmet expectations with the local populations, as international companies are still in process of building the LNG complex (Morier-Genoud, 2020: 2; Brincat, 2020). It can be argued that ASWJ is exploiting the existing long-standing grievances amid the discovery of the natural gas, capitalising on the fact that the international companies and the extractive industries are primarily employing non-local workers. Moreover, there are local reports emerging that these industries are pushing the youths out of traditional forms of employment, including fishing and subsistence agriculture, making illegal activities the sole source of survival for some (Brincat, 2020). Moreover, ASWJ has historically been linked to greater criminal activities, benefiting from the heroin trade route in the region, alongside illegal logging, mining and human trafficking (Ibid).

In recent months, ASWJ have been encroaching further south, with fears from regional neighbours including Malawi, South Africa, eSwatini, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania, that the insurgency could spread throughout the region, particularly threatening the generally peaceful Southern African Development Community (SADC).

Counterinsurgency efforts

Mozambique's response to suppress the insurgency

Domestic counterinsurgency efforts have stepped up in recent months, with the Mozambican government taking on a heavy-handed approach to respond to the insurgency, including mass arrests, the forced closure of mosques, and banning any media from entering Cabo Delgado, as well as arresting journalists reporting on the violence.

More recently, the Mozambican government has signed a security agreement with Total energy company to support the development of the USD 20 billion LNG project amid the ongoing insurgency (Amen, 2020). As per the agreement, the joint task force will ensure the security of the projects' activities in the Afungi site and in the broader area of the projects operations (Ibid.) The Mozambique Defence Armed Forces have also outsourced some of its security operations and technical assistance to private Russian, South African and French security outfits, and more recently, reports of the involvement Zimbabwean security forces (Chikohomero, 2020). This has not yielded significant results, as ASJW has become further emboldened and continue to expand operations into the neighbouring Nampula and Niassa provinces (Ibid.). The heavy-handed counterinsurgency approach could be argued to be ineffective and could be providing the insurgents with useful populist motivation and refuels terrorist retaliation (ACLEDA, 2020). However, it must be noted that the Mozambican government managed to contain the terrorist threat to a geographic area covering approximately half the province (Morier-Genoud, 2020: 1). It is unclear whether the government can maintain this.

Authorities have been known to arrest, harass, and kidnap civilians suspected to be terrorists, with many dying during detention (Ibid.). The government's strategy of over-militarisation, whereby it deploys police and military in almost all parts of Cabo Delgado province, may prolong the attacks. The indiscriminate action against unarmed citizens may ferment pro-terrorist sympathies in the region and sow anti-government discontent (Zitmar News, 2020). In a historically poor, marginalised, northern region where many already feel excluded from accessing state resources and central government neglect, (Mukeredzi, 2020) the approach taken by the state may further alienate the citizenry and push them towards collaborating and protecting the insurgents. However, ASWJ has not garnered widespread legitimacy amongst residents of Cabo Delgado, who has been their main victims, further, the local population have used *Al-Shabaab* to refer to the sect, as it means 'youth' in Arabic, and dubbed after the terrorist organisation operating out of Somalia, rather than what the entity has named themselves (Morier-Genoud, 2020: 3).

External Response

Regionally, the governments of South Africa, the United States, and Portugal, as well as the African Union, have indicated that they are willing to help fight the insurgency; however, only in May of 2020 did Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi ask for help from other states in the region to address the advancing insurgency during the Troika Summit of SADC's organs on politics, defence and security.

Tanzanian President John Magufuli, as the current residing chairperson of SADC, stated during the 39th SADC Summit in August 2019, that there is a need to develop a regional terrorism strategy for SADC; however, this pronouncement has existed since 2015 (SADC, 2020). The regional porous borders in Southern Africa has been used by syndicates to easily operate their illicit trade, particularly between Mozambique and Tanzania, with a significant criminal threat also impacting South Africa in the form of cross-border crime. The opportunity to work closely in cross-border management presents itself as opportunity to address the fight against transnational terrorism. Tanzania has, however, deployed its national troops to the shared border area in order to prevent a spill-over of violence into its territory (Kajjo, 2020).

The ongoing insurgency presents an urgent need for a coordinated regional response. SADC has the necessary infrastructure and treaties, including the Regional Counter Terrorism Strategy and Plan of Action, which lays out the foundation should it require to act against threats to regional security (Comins, 2020). However, as it stands, SADC's response is limited to a solidarity statement and condemnation, rather than a fully-fledged coordinated or strategic response to the ongoing insurgency.

Together with SADC, President Filipe Nyusi has sought the assistance the AU to contain this issue. The acknowledgement of the various organs and nearby member states have been slow in responding since the start of the attacks in October 2017. The matter has finally reached the attention of the AU when it tabled at the 33rd AU Summit in Addis Ababa, which took place in February 2020 (Louw-Vaudran, 2020). This development follows the recent warnings from the United Nations that the issue is escalating more than ever before since the attacks begun. The AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) have extended to assist in the provision of intelligence and equipment to capacitate the security forces in order to provide a holistic response (Ibid). However, due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, it is unlikely to become a significant priority on the AU PSC. Further, Mozambique is a member of the PSC, and have historically been averse to having their domestic issues tabled (Ibid).

In a related development, South Africa stated that it would transfer undisclosed quantities and types of weapons to Mozambique in its fight against the insurgency (Defenceweb, 2020). South African authorities stated that they would assist Mozambique in its response; however, ASWJ warned South Africa, and other actors in the region, that it is opening itself up to retaliation within the country's borders should it decide to get involved (Hunter, 2020). However, South Africa cannot remove itself from the situation as it remains impacted by the

national security of other states, particularly within SADC. In response, Intelligence Minister Ayanda Dlodlo stated that the State Security Agency (SSA) was taking the threats made by ASWJ against South Africa seriously and opted for a closed-door strategy approach, notably around the possibility of the deployment of special forces to Mozambique (Gerber, 2020). Not only is the movement of the insurgents further south in the region a security risk, but the displacement of people poses a humanitarian concern and risks the potential influx of people in search for better opportunities to survive.

At the international level, the events have been closely observed by the agencies of the United Nations (UN), specifically the UN Resident Coordinator in Mozambique, Myrta Kaulard. Kaulard called on the international community to increase support to Mozambique, particularly amid a myriad of issues – the COVID-19 pandemic, humanitarian disasters, and the increasing violence in Mozambique (APA-News, 2020). Kaulard's entity is seeking US\$ 68 million worth of funds to address the immediate and critical needs of those impacted by extreme humanitarian conditions.

The ongoing domestic, regional, and international counter-insurgency approach leaves a lot to be desired. Zambara and Moyo-Kupeta (2020) argue that SADC should deliberately prioritise sovereign security and human security in the same weight in order to combat violent terrorism and extremism. Their strategy should prioritise the building of local capacity for mediation, dialogue, and transitional justice that ultimately allows for sustainable, inclusive development and the promotion of peace. The risk remains that northern Mozambique may become a regional centre of Islamic extremism, and it requires a coordinated and strategic response before it has a spill over effect into other SADC countries (Mukeredzi, 2020).

The way forward

The opportunity for engagement by international development, peace, and security entities, including SADC and impacted countries such as Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, Malawi, and Zimbabwe, is of utmost importance. It is significant to note that the counterinsurgency strategy must address the underlying causes of conflict – in this case, climate change, underdevelopment, and a provision of a just social contract with citizens. Any deployment and counterinsurgency strategy should focus on local development, providing basic services and creating employment opportunities for the citizenry, particularly vulnerable youth groups susceptible to joining the ongoing insurgency. There have been steps taken by the government indicating a developmental

approach through the creation of a regional development agency which includes Cabo Delgado and adopting a solution which favours economic and social aspects of addressing the conflict (Zitmar News, 2020). This, coupled with a strong, coordinated, and tactical military response, is a more compelling way of quelling the ongoing insurgency, as opposed to the current operation of indiscriminate violence.

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