

# Policy Brief

## The rise and root causes of Islamic insurgency in Mozambique and its security implication to the region

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### Executive Summary

The rise of jihadi insurgency in Mozambique's northern province of Cabo Delgado is attributed to multidimensional causes: social and economic factors, influence of radical preachers and endogenous process of extremism advancement in the province. It is worth mentioning that the insurgents aspire to establish a political order of Sharia rule. However, the causes for this violent movement relate to weak public services, poverty, unemployment, corruption and youth radicalization by foreign and national preachers.

While the insurgents grow in strength, confidence and operational capacity, the state-armed and intelligence forces are poorly structured and ill-prepared to lead small, rapid and well-resourced special counter-insurgency units and Navy to challenge the group. Hence, a multidimensional solution should be attained by including all transnational and strategic actors operating in Cabo Delgado.

# Key Points

- Mozambique's state forces are powerless to root out jihadi insurgents in the province of Cabo Delgado. Since the beginning of the terrorist attacks in the district of Mocímboa da Praia, 798 "organized violent events" including kidnapping, demonstration, etc. have taken place across the whole country. According to the ACLED report, the "total number of fatalities from organised violence and civilian targeting" in Cabo Delgado was 2,614 and 1,312 respectively during the time between October 2017 and February 2021. This crisis derails the government's defence and security forces resolution to defeat the insurgents and retake the towns they occupied.
- The root causes of the jihadi insurgency are multidimensional.
- Securing natural gas and oil infrastructures is as important as the need to keep stable government institutions and a functional state system.
- The solution to the jihadi insurgency crisis requires sitting around a table of all concerned actors from Mozambique; SADC's Organ on politics, defence and security; Eastern Africa Standby Forces; ECOWAS; the USA; the UK; EU countries and Saudi Arabia.
- SADC's most recent Extraordinary Troika Summit in Botswana acknowledged the rising of insurgency and terrorism activities in the region, but fell short of providing a joint defence and security strategy to curb Islamism violence.

## Introduction

The attacks perpetrated by the militant Islamist group, so called Al-Shabaab, against police stations, local government buildings and civilians in the district of Mocímboa da Praia in Cabo Delgado province three years ago marked the beginning of violent insurgency in Mozambique. In addition, this event signalled an end to the ideal of unhindered peace and security in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region.

While the exact name of the insurgent group remains unclear, there are a number of sources which pinpoint the group is locally called both

as Al-Shabaab, meaning the youth in Arabic, and Ahlu Sunnah Wal-Jamaa, that is, the adepts of the Prophet's tradition"<sup>1</sup>. Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira's comprehensive study argues that "the Mocímboa da Praia group has links with the networks of Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahedeen, or just Al-Shabaab, a Somali-based jihadist group operating mainly in Somalia and in Kenya"<sup>2</sup>. Others suggested that the insurgents also have ties with the Islamic State<sup>3</sup>.

Mozambique's government has launched counter-insurgency operations to defeat the jihadist combatants either by its own military means or, as witnessed in 2019, with the intervention of Russian Wagner Group mercenaries and the DAG Group. However, it seems that, at least for the time being, none of the interventions has stopped the insurgents. SADC's Heads of State and Government Extraordinary Troika Summit of Botswana of 27 November 2020 acknowledged that "terrorism activities in the region have increased exponentially in the recent past."<sup>4</sup> Joint actions to combat the insurgents in Cabo Delgado remain to be seen.

This policy brief argues that peace and security matters to Mozambicans as much as it does to transnational companies with interests in gas and oil resources. In addition, it argues that only a multidimensional solution can overcome the insurgency.

The policy brief is structured in three interconnected sections which attempt to explain the rise and root causes of Islamic insurgency and its wide security implication to the region.

## Insurgency: The Ultimate Threat to Peace in Mozambique

The insurgency challenges Mozambique is facing today underlie an overarching issue which relates directly to the government's powerlessness to tackle internal threats by the Al-Shabaab insurgents. Jaime Bessa Neto, the country's minister of defence, set a more optimistic view in January 2020 in his appointment ceremony speech. In particular, he stated that "team working is the only way of meeting Mozambique's objectives. We believe that we will make the best use of existing defence personnel to ensure peace and tranquillity for Mozambicans"<sup>5</sup>.

Eight months later, on 13 August 2020, Bessa Neto, in his press release on the then security situation in Cabo Delgado, reiterated that the Mozambican State was strong enough to root out terrorism. In addition, he made a rare admission as he affirmed that the country needed "support for border surveillance to stop bandits entering national territories"<sup>6</sup>.

There are, at least, three important points to derive from Minister Neto's address to the press and one more to add to them. Each point intends to emphasize the challenges faced by the army in curbing terrorism. First, it is difficult to guess whether the minister meant the control of

internal or coastal borders. In fact, both internal and coastal borders seem to become a source of threat: while cross-national borders facilitate the insurgent fighters' trespassing the frontiers to Tanzania, the sea also poses a threat as border vulnerability is greater due to geographical proximity of Cabo Delgado's regions of Pemba, Quissanga, Mocímboa da Praia, Momba and Palma to the Indian Ocean. A report by the Institute for Security Studies asserted that "roughly 55 per cent of known oil reserves and 40 per cent of gas reserves are in the Indian Ocean region"<sup>7</sup>.

As Mozambique struggles to confront maritime terrorism and transnational organised crime, the United States Under Secretary of State, Heather Merritt, assures that the US is committed to "helping Mozambique government efforts to combat narcotrafficking. We are helping them combat transnational organised crime in the sea through more effective patrolling"<sup>8</sup>. Likewise, France which has got Mayotte, an Indian Ocean military base located within a distance of 500 kilometres from Pemba, is working on "the terms of maritime cooperation with Mozambique, and is already training Mozambican Navy on patrolling activities"<sup>9</sup>.

Second, the reference to the insurgents as "bandits" sticks out as a political attempt at downplaying the strength of an increasingly organized violent group which wreaks havoc in

the province by killing civilians; targeting police, defence and security forces; and kidnapping children and women. This exposes the government's weak structures as well as its feeble capacity to quell the insurgency.

The third point relates to a journalist's question to the defence minister on whether or not "there were already mercenaries in Cabo Delgado". The minister's response was clear: "There are no mercenaries."<sup>10</sup> This is valid only as a rhetorical ploy to reassure the Mozambicans that their government has the situation under control and is able to deal with the insurgents on its own military power.

Unfortunately, the facts signal a different and more complex reality as the 2019 agreement on gas between President Filipe Nyusi and Russian President Vladimir Putin, was followed by an immediate "arrival of approximately 160 mercenaries and military equipment of the Wagner Group," according to some sources<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless, the Wagner Group pulled out after a few months but another mercenary outfit, the DAG Group, came the same year and has stayed to this day. If bandits are able to overrun towns and take on Mozambique's defence armed forces (FADM), then any army will aspire to have such groups of mercenaries within the ranks. The following section seeks to unearth the causes of insurgency in Cabo Delgado.

The reluctance of the minister of defence to face the reality seems to highlight an official government strategy which consists, on the one hand, of downplaying the threat posed by the insurgents, and on the other, concealing the lack of internal means to stem the insurgency. In his state of nation speech to the parliament on 16 December 2020, President Filipe Nyusi said, “We are receiving expressions of intention to help Mozambique from many countries. There are a lot, from Europe, Asia, America and Africa, including the SADC.”<sup>12</sup> But he cautioned that the “country needs to know how to manage all the international offer for support to combat armed insurgency in Cabo Delgado and avoid creating a salad of interventions”. He added, “We are interacting with all these wills. Whichever way the decision turns out, it is up to the Defence and Security Forces of the country to be in the driving seat of the fight against the insurgents”<sup>13</sup>.

The expression the salad of interventions could mean that President Nyusi’s government will not be forced to take any international intervention. What is also unclear is that the President puddled between two confusing messages: the intentions to help and an international offer for support. The intention might apply to something intangible, whereas the offer could refer to something concrete that an external actor presented to his government. While there seems to be lacking

clarity on whether or not to accept the support, the President paid tribute to 53 young people who were brutally assassinated in Cabo Delgado district of Muidumbe by the insurgents whom he called the “terrorists who turned into assassins of their own brothers”<sup>14</sup>. The reality is that violence is growing and neither the defence nor the security forces are able to have the final solution to the insurgency.

## The Root Causes of Insurgency

There is no consensus among researchers on the real causes of the rising of Jihadist violence in Cabo Delgado, a context described by Rodrigues as “a low intensity civil war that is becoming an international conflict.”<sup>15</sup> To the question that enquires the root causes beneath the rising insurgency in the province, we shall say in advance that the views by authors and experts point out at least three different causes: social and economic factors; influence of radical preachers and “religious dynamics in Cabo Delgado”<sup>16</sup>.

The social and economic perspective is defended by Hanlon who argues that the “cause of conflict is material deprivation, particularly poverty, marginalization and lack of perspectives among the youth, with religion functioning only as a rallying point or cloak”<sup>17</sup>. In contrast, Habibe,

Forquilha and Salvador underlined both internal and external factors. According to these authors, “the Al-Shabaab group argued that the solution to problems such as unemployment, widespread corruption in the officialdom, political exclusion and social inequalities lay in adherence to the puritanical version of Islam”<sup>18</sup>. Thus, for this group, the people were encouraged to “join the international jihad movement”<sup>19</sup>.

The third cause focuses on the evolutionary process of “Al-Shabaab insurgents in terms of their historical trajectory, developing from an Islamist sect into a violent jihadi armed group undergoing a process of internationalization which can develop or evolve in various ways in the future”<sup>20</sup>. Although these causes seem plausible, none of them stands out as a full-blown cause. For instance, radicalization can be seen as an offshoot of weak government capacity to deliver the basic social and economic rights to the citizens.

There is a prevailing sense that the government neglects Cabo Delgado, where grinding poverty affects the people, mainly, the youth who find neither the opportunity nor the means to fulfil their goals. This situation of neglect brings about a breeding ground for discontent and detachment from the state that opens space for radical preaching. In addition, weak state structures of governance, ineffective public

institutions, corruption and poverty are deeply exposed by the fact that the province’s abundant natural resources have not yet “transformed regional economic opportunities into improved livelihoods”<sup>21</sup>.

The situation of poverty and deprivation has been widely exploited by radical preachers from Tanzania like Sheik Hassan. In addition, other sheiks in Mocímboa da Praia, were noticed in Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira’s study to take advantage of the vulnerable youth. For these authors, the greatest portion of the young people cannot speak Portuguese and are instead fluent in local languages as well as Kiswahili. These sheiks, in their lectures, touched upon youth problems such as unemployment and poor living conditions and asked why they live under abject misery when Allah has given abundant wealth to Mocímboa da Praia<sup>22</sup>. These authors spelled out that for the greatest number of young people trapped in poverty, unemployment and permanent fear of the unknown, “jihad was the right extremism; Islam was important for challenging local authorities and building a new social and political order”<sup>23</sup>.

Cabo Delgado, often referred to as the forgotten Cabo, is the place where FRELIMO mounted its anti-colonial struggle against Portugal in the 1960s. The province is ranked the fourth worst in terms of poverty and out of its 1,302,322 population,

approximately 53 per cent, is aged under 18.<sup>24</sup> The 2017 Census, according to Mozambique's National Statistics Institute (INE), has shown that 140,217 children of both sexes aged 10–14 could not read and write, compared to only 123,838 who could do. The illiterate group exceeds the literate one by 16,379. Those in the age group of 15–29 were also poorly literate. Specifically, 166,848 males within the age group could read and write whereas 90,313 could not. The figure for the females is that 144,918 could read and write while 154,079 could not. INE illustrates that 1,739,020 people live in rural areas while only 528,695 dwell in urban settings<sup>25</sup>.

These figures show a puzzling reality of illiteracy among young population. It could be that schooling was inaccessible to them or that they found more rewarding incentives of earning a living than going to school. As the situation deepens, the inequality and marginalization continue to affect this province.

The INE does not clearly state whether the indicators on illiteracy were influenced by location—rural or urban. In terms of economic activity, the majority, around 622,180 people, depend on agriculture and silviculture while 52,333 rely on business.

The energy, extractive industry, administration, construction and manufacturing industry are by far the sectors that employ the least, absorbing

a total of 25,673 people only. However, more than 72,650 are either employed in other service sectors or did not specify their occupation. With a total population of 2,478,039 and a higher proportion of the young population, Cabo Delgado is one of Mozambique's provinces with the highest population growth rate – 3.4 per cent. Neither its fertile and arable land nor its abundant minerals have translated into development and growth opportunities to improve the livelihoods of the local communities. The longer this reality persists the more marginalised the people will be becoming an easy prey for terrorists and extremists.

Eric Morier-Genoud points out that the “emergence of the Al-Shabaab sect and its shift to armed jihadism around 2016 did not happen in a vacuum. When the sect emerged in the 2000s, the province of Cabo Delgado was (as it still is) one of the poorest in Mozambique”<sup>26</sup>. This study highlights that the “sect aimed to establish a counter-society ruled exclusively according to Islamic law (sharia) and one that had nothing to do with the Sufi Muslim majority of Cabo Delgado or the Wahhabi Islamic Council of Mozambique that opposed the sect from the start”<sup>27</sup>.

The notion of “counter-society” highlights that the jihadists offered a set of solutions which in their view could be attractive to the population, for instance, not attending schooling; adopting

a different dress code and new praying habits; and rejecting state administration altogether. Denial of these moves was met by violence for the jihadists believed the greater the opposition to the violence by the government forces, the wider the insurgency would become.

The number of attacks in three years, from 5 October 2017 to February 2021, signals a persistent upward pattern of escalation. According to ACLED and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, death toll from the conflict reached more than 2,614 while the number of people in severe hunger came to be 710,000. To date, 570,000 civilians were forced to flee their homes and are heavily reliant on humanitarian aid. The attack escalated in November 2020 brutally killing 50 people and abducting several women and children.<sup>28</sup> What seemed an isolated act of banditry ignited by an 'Islamist sect', to quote Morier-Genoud, has escalated into a jihadi war which has produced a zone of intense conflict and breeding ground for organized crimes, which could have far reaching impacts across the region and internationally.

Cabo Delgado's natural gas and oil reserves render the province a terrain of fierce disputes among multinational players with regard to who should get what and how. Therefore, the insurgency is likely to bring negative direct impacts on energy companies operating in the province. What is argued is that, indeed, understanding the Cabo

Delgado insurgency requires attention to a specific combination of economic or social grievances and religious mobilisation. Unfortunately, these problems have their roots elsewhere in Africa. Thus, as the threat of the insurgency is there, the search of the solutions would need to be as inclusive and multidimensional as possible.

## Transnational Actors and Multidimensional Solution

The discovery of oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) in Cabo Delgado does not simply endow Mozambique with alternative sources for revenues and bring in multinational actors in energy sectors. It also fuels the insurgents' narrative that it is pointless to expect any dividend now, while the province, for a long time, has been plagued by poverty, corruption and neglect imposed by successive FRELIMO governments. However true that might be, the reality is that there is a huge investment in resource-extraction infrastructure in the midst of instability. For instance, multinational energy giants such as America's Exxon Mobil, France's Total, and Italy's ENI are spending on oil and gas infrastructures, but the absence of government spending on infrastructure that improves people's lives could mean that these companies' "investments are threatened by a disparate collection of jihadists"<sup>29</sup>.



At the moment, the defence and security forces are simply powerless to fight and defeat the insurgent groups, let alone to offer protection for the companies to continue developing their projects. Total that has a project in Afungi, Palma, hired Frédéric Marbot, a former official in the French army, to provide security for its plants<sup>30</sup>. Hiring security to protect natural gas and oil infrastructures is not sustainable. It exposes the view that multinational corporations do care more about profit making than fostering decent job creation and development for the local people.

A possible solution to this insurgency crisis would imply a Summit of Heads of State and Government of all concerned actors from Mozambique; SADC's organ on politics, defence and security cooperation; Eastern Africa Standby Forces (EASF); ECOWAS; the USA; the UK; EU and Saudi Arabia. The EASF and ECOWAS experiences on fighting violent jihadism may help to share some tactics and strategies used in Somalia and within the Sahel region. The interests that countries such as the USA, the UK and some EU states have shown in the province's natural resources make them key government allies in the search for sustainable solution to the jihadi insurgency in Cabo Delgado. Additionally, Saudi Arabia might be important to address both potential religious links and material support for radical preachers in this province.

The complexity of the problem in Cabo Delgado would require finding a broader involvement of countries that have direct interest in natural gas revenues as some EU countries do, those that have a longstanding experience in combating terrorism and radical jihadism in their regions and countries singled out as suppliers of doctrine and wherewithal for radical jihadism. This summit would have three objectives: to devise a multidimensional plan of actions; to address the root causes of jihadi insurgency; and to find ways of implementing President Filipe Nyusi's new Agency for integrated development of the North (ADIN).

This initiative is long overdue but needs peaceful and secure environment to come to fruition. Unfortunately, the FADM is currently deemed powerless to curb the insurgents. The main reasons relate to lack of equipment, particularly airlifting capacity, poor training, dwindling supply of goods and low morale spawned by unpaid and delayed wages. Besides the limitations to combat the terrorists, the sea along "Cabo Delgado has strengthened its role as a viaduct for smuggling of narcotics and the consequent illicit enrichment of mafia elites and networks of traffickers". Despite those threats, the "Navy<sup>31</sup>" is characterised as having "lack of means and being the branch of the armed forces with more men on land than at sea"<sup>32</sup>.

## Conclusion

The root causes of Islamic extremism and radicalization in Cabo Delgado are multidimensional. The crisis underlines the limited capacity of the central government to control its territory and protect its citizens from harm, poverty, unemployment, lack of opportunities for the young people, etc. These social and economic causes are important as they define the religious context in which young people give in to the enticement of radical preachers to embrace Jihad and reject state institutions in favour of the Sharia law.

While the insurgents have engulfed Cabo Delgado and the defence and security forces remained powerless to combat the Al-Shabaab group, the key to end the conflict should be multidimensional in its scope.

## Policy Recommendations

This policy brief lays out the following policy recommendations that could be a step in the right direction toward addressing the root causes of the rise of Islamist insurgents in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado. The first and second are directed toward the Mozambican government; the third toward private companies; and the fourth and fifth toward the AU and UN policymakers.

- Mozambique's government should develop a fully integrated and comprehensive plan of permanent dialogue with those countries interested in its natural resources so as to understand, defend and address the aspirations, challenges and goals of the local youth.
- Mozambique's authorities should prioritise a long-term solution to the country's security problems by investing massively and purposefully so as to strengthen the capabilities of the national armed forces and releasing the policy for its core law and order duties. The armed forces should focus on a few critical areas: elite combat; counter-insurgency units and the Navy; and well-equipped, paid and intelligence-led targeted operations.
- Multinational companies with projects interested in natural gas and oil should be the government's critical partners in creating local decent jobs, infrastructures tailored to develop

literacy programs, critical skills, accessible training and quality health services for the local people.

- The AU and UN should try to organise a meeting between Mozambique's government and its regional allies from SADC and international partners to exploit the potential of multidimensional solution to the deep-rooted jihadi insurgency in Cabo Delgado.
- Security and defence policy-makers should target a strategic and constructive partnership with transnational actors to respond in a more coordinated and effective way to organised crimes.

# Endnotes

- 1 António Rodrigues, “Cabo Delgado perto de se transformar em palco de um conflito internacional”, p. 24.
- 2 Habibe, Forquilha e Pereira, “Islamic Radicalization in Northern Mozambique. The Case of Mocímboa da Praia”, p. 10; Lister, “Jihadi Insurgency in Mozambique Grows in Sophistication and Reach”, pp. 35–36.
- 3 Chichava and Alden, “Cabo Delgado and the Rise of Militant Islam: Another Niger Delta in Making?”, p. 2.
- 4 Remarks by her Excellency Dr Stergomena Lawrence Tax, SADC Executive Secretary, During the Occasion of the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation, Gaborone, Botswana, 26 November 2020, p. 1.
- 5 Lusa, “Novo ministro da Defesa de Moçambique pede trabalho de equipa para garantir paz”.
- 6 Defence Minister Jaime Bessa Neto comments were at a joint seven minutes press conference with Amade Miguidade, Minister of Interior, at the Operational Command of the Organs of Defence and Security, in Maputo, available in Portuguese at “Transmissão ao vivo da Televisão de Moçambique – TVM, YouTube, August 13, 2020.
- 7 Institute for Security Studies, “Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean”, p. 3.
- 8 Rodrigues, “Cabo Delgado”, p. 24.
- 9 Ibid., p. 24.
- 10 “Transmissão ao vivo da Televisão de Moçambique – TVM, YouTube.
- 11 Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, Conflict Barometer, 2019, p. 80; Lister, “Jihadi Insurgency in Mozambique Grows in Sophistication and Reach”, p. 42; A Dirty Little War in Mozambique: Air War analysis, p. 74.
- 12 Karina Gomes, Agencia Lusa, “Nyusi: O estado da Nação é de renovada esperança”, DW, 16. 12. 2020.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Rodrigues, “Cabo Delgado”, p. 24.
- 16 Genoud, “The Jihadi Insurgency in Mozambique”, p. 401 at p. 397.
- 17 Ibid., p. 397.
- 18 Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira, “Islamic Radicalization in Northern Mozambique”, p. 31.
- 19 Ibid., p. 31.
- 20 Genoud, “The Jihadi Insurgency in Mozambique”, p. 407.
- 21 Silva, “Cabo Delgado já vive maldição dos recursos naturais”.
- 22 Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira, “Islamic Radicalization in Northern Mozambique”, p. 16 at pp. 23-24.
- 23 Ibid., p. 23.
- 24 Instituto Nacional de Estatística, “Informação Transmitida ao STAE e aos Órgãos da CNE pelo Órgão Reitor do Sistema Estatístico Nacional (INE): Percentagem de População com 18 Anos e Mais por Província”, Enviado ao STAE no dia 25 de Maio de 2019.
- 25 The data extracted from INE spreadsheets: “Quadro 18. População de 5 Anos e Mais por condição de Alfabetização e sexo, segundo área de residência e idade. Cabo Delgado, 2017”; “Quadro 1. População recenseada por área de residência e categoria censitária, segundo idade e sexo. Província de Cabo Delgado, 2017” and “Quadro 34. População ocupada de 15 anos e mais por ramo de actividade, segundo área de residência, sexo e ocupação principal. Cabo Delgado, 2017”, INE, Census 2017.
- 26 Ibid., p. 405.
- 27 Ibid., p. 407.
- 28 Hanlon, “Mozambique news reports and clippings”, Mozambique 485, 6 May 2020, p. 1; Cabo Ligado Weekly, 8–14 February 2021. UN News, “UN Chief shocked at wanton brutality in northern Mozambique”.
- 29 In A Dirty Little War in Mozambique, p. 79.
- 30 Rodrigues, “Cabo Delgado”, p. 29.
- 31 Centro para Democracia e Desenvolvimento, “The hidden face of the war in Cabo Delgado”, p. 2.
- 32 Ibid., p. 2.

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