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BRIEFING

The Mozambique Conflict and Deteriorating Security Situation

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The **Mozambique Conflict** and Deteriorating Security Situation

For almost three years, the ISIS-affiliated extremist group Ansar al-Sunna has spearheaded an insurgency in Mozambique's northern province of Cabo Delgado. In recent months the situation in Cabo Delgado has deteriorated significantly and violent attacks are now frequent. Militants have begun to target military positions having previously focused on civilian targets. It is a sign that the group is growing in resilience, operational capacity and confidence. From its first few attacks in Mocimboa de Praia in late 2017, the group now launches more than 20 attacks every month in an insurgency that covers nine major towns and districts along the Cabo Delgado coast. A battle for the town of Macomia at the end of May demonstrates the group's organisational capacity and ambition as well as an escalation in the government's counter-offensive efforts. On 30 May 2020, government forces engaged Ansar al-Sunna militants in one of the largest counter-terrorism operations to date, resulting in the reported deaths of 78 insurgents, including two of the group's leaders. The extent to which this will impact Ansar al-Sunna's operations and long-term ambitions remains to be understood.

Figure 1 – Ansar al-Sunna activity in 2017-18 and 2019-2020



Source: GEM and ACLED data.

We have analysed the evolution of Ansar al-Sunna's Islamist insurgency in Cabo Delgado and its implications, from the group's roots as a non-violent religious movement to its pursuit of territory through kidnappings, lootings and mass killings. Its expansion in the north is unprecedented in the context of peace and security in Mozambique. However, in the context of Islamist extremism across the African continent, the situation is not unique. Ansar al-Sunna has rapidly risen in prominence to potentially pose just as acute a threat as Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin, Jama'a Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in the Sahel, and al-Shabaab in Somalia. We find similarities in the growth patterns of Ansar al-Sunna and ISGS, from the initial focus on civilian targets through to the current campaigns against military and state forces. ISGS has become one of the most destabilising factors in the Sahel, and Mozambique faces a similar challenge with Ansar al-Sunna.

We see a strong risk of the security situation deteriorating further over the next 18 months unless a coordinated transnational effort is launched to assist national authorities to counter Ansar al-Sunna. There are similarities in the insurgencies of Ansar al-Sunna with those of other Islamist groups in sub-Saharan Africa, with the group being at a similar stage of development to JNIM in Mali three years ago and

Boko Haram in Nigeria six years ago. It has already begun to outpace ISGS in parts of its operations. These groups have since grown and now occupy significant territory in western and central Africa. In April 2020, Maputo commissioned a private contractor in South Africa to conduct air strikes against Ansar al-Sunna positions in Cabo Delgado. Leaders recognise the threat of Ansar al-Sunna, but more needs to be done. International governments need to offer not just military backing to Maputo, but also logistical support and advice. Ansar al-Sunna is recruiting members at scale, establishing robust financial networks across the country and leveraging local grievances to build legitimacy within communities. The ecosystem supporting Ansar al-Sunna needs to be dismantled to secure peace and prosperity in the north. Among the poorest regions in Mozambique, Cabo Delgado also has one of the world's largest gas deposits with potential to transform the national economy. In February 2020, Exxon Mobil and Total requested more troops from Maputo to guard their operations. However, the Mozambican military may find it difficult to protect commercial interests in Cabo Delgado in the medium to long term.

In the last few months, we have seen a stepped-up offensive by the group. Militants and their leadership seek to garner greater influence in the region and among vulnerable communities in Cabo Delgado.

Islamist Insurgency in the North

Ansar al-Sunna, known locally as al-Shabaab, emerged in the northern province of Cabo Delgado in 2015 as a non-violent Islamist organisation. They launched their first attack in October 2017. While Mozambique has also been grappling with a dissident RENAMO militancy problem in the central region, Ansar al-Sunna poses the most significant threat to peace and security in the country.¹ The Tony Blair Institute's Global Extremism Monitor (GEM) found that Ansar al-Sunna was involved in nearly 70 per cent of all violent activities in Mozambique since 2018, gradually intensifying their campaign as each quarter passed. The insurgency has evolved in stages, diversifying tactics as the group built up capacity. In its first years as a violent actor, the group focused on civilian targets before diversifying to include harder targets from 2019 onwards. Fourteen per cent of the group's offensives now engage military and state forces. The group is on an upward trajectory to undermine the state, capitalise on civilian fear and establish territory across Cabo Delgado.

Ansar al-Sunna's Operational Growth

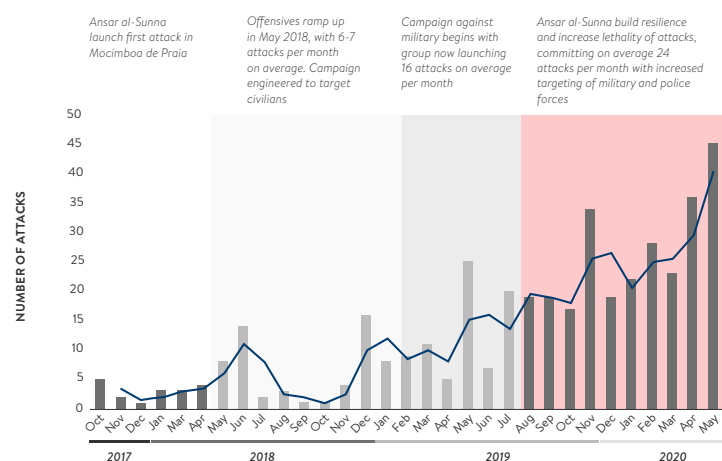
The rise of Ansar al-Sunna and the escalation of its activities since 2017 draws parallels with several other Islamist militant groups on the continent, most notably the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. Ansar al-Sunna has already reached several key milestones in their insurgency that other Islamist extremist groups had previously passed. It is important to explore Ansar al-Sunna's operational evolution, proliferation in violent

activities and pursuit of territory in the context of other violent Islamist extremist groups in sub-Saharan Africa. While they share a similar violent ideology, Ansar al-Sunna is following a similar operational trajectory to ISGS. ISGS has recently become the most feared actor in the Sahel, and in February 2020, President Macron of France declared that eliminating ISGS was the security priority in the region.²

As with ISGS, Ansar-al Sunna's first offensive in October 2017 was spectacular in nature. In the months following the group's inaugural attack, Ansar-al Sunna kept a relatively low profile and perpetrated just two to three smaller-scale offensives, mainly against residents of Palma, Mocimboa da Praia and Macomia. However, from May 2018, nearly seven months after that first attack, the group increased its operations to six to seven attacks per month. By mid-2019, the second full year of the insurgency, this had nearly doubled, and the group was conducting an average of 16 attacks each month as it sought to establish further territory.

Ansar al-Sunna's violent activities in 2019 intensified in a similar way to how the GEM documented ISGS's growth in its second operational year, where it also began to engage harder targets including the military and armed forces. This transformation is likely due to a recognition among Ansar al-Sunna militants that they now possess the capacity and sophistication in their insurgency to viably bid for territory. It's a rapid change that needs to be understood by those engaged in countering the activities of the group. Our analysis shows that Ansar al-Sunna is following an upward trajectory in violence across Cabo Delgado. In 2020, Ansar al-Sunna has been launching more than 20 attacks per month.

Figure 2 – Ansar al-Sunna escalation and stages of violence 2017–2020



Source: GEM and ACLED data.

Ansar al-Sunna is attempting to consolidate territory by gradually strengthening its insurgency. The evolution of its campaign in Cabo Delgado is like how other insurgent groups across Africa have emerged, thrived and matured. With Boko Haram, the group spent several years building its insurgency while expanding its foothold in the towns and villages scattered around the Lake Chad Basin.³ Several groups in the Sahel aligned to al-Qaeda or ISIS (including JNIM and ISGS) have successfully established territory and created an environment where national, regional and international governments are finding it increasingly difficult to reinstate themselves. Ansar al-Sunna is following a similar trajectory as these groups, who all adhere to a distorted interpretation of Islam that justifies the use of violence.

Spread Across Cabo Delgado: 2017–2020

Targeting new towns often begins with offensives against civilians that trigger state responses. Increased but under-resourced military presences in vulnerable towns and villages present Islamist extremist groups with an opportunity to seize weapons and armoury through offensives against security facilities and personnel. Expanding geography and escalating targets enables groups to consolidate their grip on territory, develop their operational capacity and expand their influence into neighbouring towns at the expense of state legitimacy. This is a common tactic used by Islamist groups with proven success. In Iraq, ISIS would regularly launch offensives against civilians in towns and villages, deliberately inducing a state response. In doing so, the group improved its position, eroded Iraqi forces and consolidated new territory. In Africa, Boko Haram and JNIM have adopted similar tactics in attacking civilians, overwhelming the state and expanding into new territory. Ansar al-Sunna is using the same strategy.

2017–2018: Localised Violence

In 2017, Ansar al-Sunna focused its offensives on the single district of Mocimboa de Praia, where most of the militants are reportedly from. By 2018, its activities had expanded to six other areas in Cabo Delgado including Mocimboa de Praia, Macomia, Mitumba, Nangade, Palma and Quissanga.

Three areas – Mocimboa de Praia, Macomia and Palma – saw more than 77 per cent of all attacks in 2018, with militants frequently looting villages for supplies, destroying houses and killing civilians. On 20 September 2018, militants killed 12 people in Piqueue village. At least 55 houses were burned and destroyed in what was one of the worst attacks committed by the Islamist extremist group.⁴

By targeting and infiltrating these towns and villages, the group can instil fear in the population, restock supplies and drive recruitment. New towns and villages also become a source of revenue and resources for the group's operations.

Recruitment

Militants have recruited members ranging in age from 20 to 35 from the towns of Macomia, Palma and Nangade.⁵ The group's members use local narratives to promote a transnational jihadi ideology. The group exploits Islam and local grievances to recruit members and uses its regional and global links to train and arm them. Ansar al-Sunna's message has resonated with disgruntled youth in Mozambique. The group's hard-line narrative positioned its idea of puritanical Islamic government as a panacea for decades of political exclusion, unemployment and poverty, which are more prevalent in the Muslim-majority areas of the north.⁶ Ansar al-Sunna's anti-Sufi rhetoric was especially appealing. Many saw Sufi leaders as too passive in the face of government policies perceived as negatively affecting Muslims. By August 2018, the Mozambican police identified six men as leaders of Ansar al-Sunna in Cabo Delgado – Abdul Faizal, Abdul Raim, Abdul Remane, Ibn Omar, "Salimo", and Nuno Remane – without giving details on their backgrounds and connections. However, it is reported that there could be up to 30 operational leaders and commanders driving the Ansar al-Sunna insurgency.⁷

Ansar al-Sunna's leaders are reported to have ties to Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, The Congo, Tanzania, Sudan and Saudi Arabia. According to reports citing Mozambican authorities, some of them studied, trained or at least received their literature from one or more of these countries.⁸

The group is believed to have training camps in northern Tanzania, the Kibiti district of Tanzania and the African Great Lakes region. It is also reported that recruits are trained domestically by a dismissed Mozambican policeman and former members of the Mozambican border guards.⁹ Internationally, the militia sends young men to neighbouring Tanzania, Kenya and Somalia for religious and military training.¹⁰

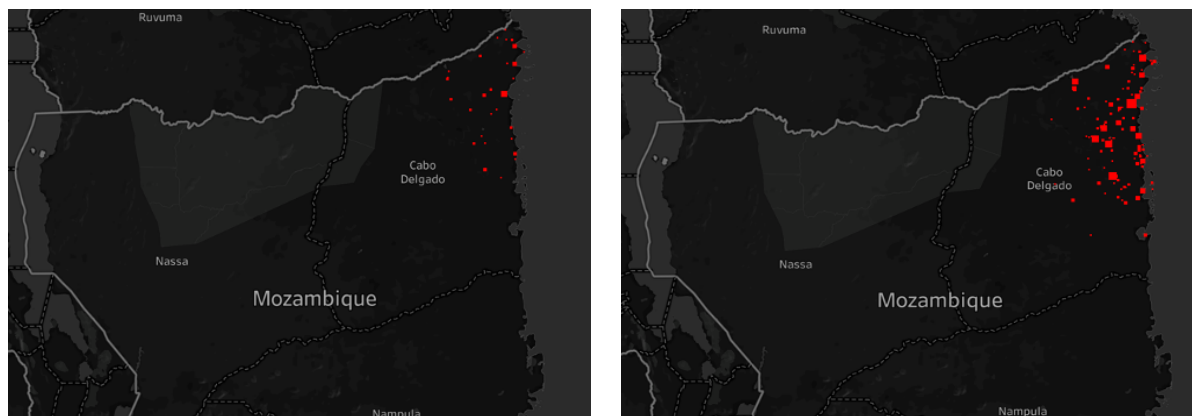
Financial Networks

With improved financial networks, Ansar al-Sunna is able to fund its operations, procure weapons and offer economic incentives to recruits including financial support for their families and to establish new businesses. Preliminary findings of a study by Mozambican academics reveal that the extremist group is financed from illicit activities such as trade in wood, charcoal, ivory and rubber, involving partners in Tanzania, the Great Lakes, China and Vietnam.

In addition, the group also receives domestic and foreign donations from supporters.¹¹ Beyond military operations and member support, the funds are also used to support the international travel of the groups leadership and to produce and disseminate propaganda videos, including reproducing videos of Aboud Rogo Mohammed, a deceased influential Islamist ideologue.

Expanded revenue streams facilitate new cycles of recruitment. Islamist extremist groups are often able to provide junior recruits with economic incentives not readily available, such as monthly salaries that exceed minimum wage, welfare benefits and other forms of compensation. This is the case with several groups including the Maute in the Philippines, al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin and Hizbul Mujahideen in India. Targeting the districts, towns and villages of Cabo Delgado serves to strengthen Ansar al-Sunna's militant base and expand its operations.

Figure 3 – Ansar al-Sunna activity in 2017–18 and 2019–2020



Source: GEM and ACLED data.

2019: Expansion and Diversification

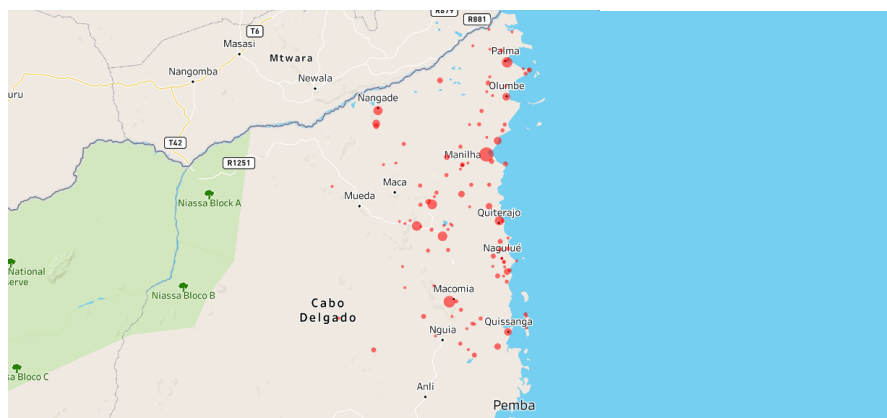
By 2019, Ansar al-Sunna operations encompassed nine towns and districts, with Ancuabe, Ibo and Meluco added as new hotspots for the group's violence. Macomia saw the most violence in 2019, with villages often destroyed and civilians assaulted frequently. Compared to all other towns targeted by the group, Macomia also saw the highest number of attacks

against security targets. As Ansar al-Sunna launched frequent offensives against civilians, the Mozambican military increased its presence in Macomia. This led to clashes with the group and enabled Ansar al-Sunna to start targeting security personnel, who were beginning to become overwhelmed with the dual need to protect villages and their own positions. Militants would seize weapons and equipment, strengthening their capacity and position throughout Cabo Delgado.

Ansar al-Sunna began to approach different towns and districts in 2019, establishing new hubs for restocking supplies and recruiting militants. Several villages in Muidumbe, including Milangalewa and Chutiunda, were attacked in 2019, with militants killing villagers, looting supplies, destroying agriculture plots and

burning down houses. The GEM documented several clashes with the military in Muidumbe in 2019. As in Macomia, Ansar al-Sunna responded to the increased military presence with targeted attacks against security personnel.

Figure 4 – Ansar al-Sunna’s violent activity and spread across Cabo Delgado from 2017–2020



Source: GEM and ACLED data.

2020: Strengthening Its Campaign Across Cabo Delgado

Muidumbe saw a fifth of all Ansar al-Sunna activity between January and April 2020. The town of Quissanga, which had previously received little attention from militants, became the most targeted area in 2020. More than 25 per cent of offensives took place in Quissanga, with the group also targeting nine other towns and districts, including Mocimboa da Praia. Ansar al-Sunna stepped up offensives, launching more than 20 attacks per month. From January to April, 14 per cent of Ansar al-Sunna activity targeted military and state police forces, with Quissanga seeing more than 40 per cent of security-focused attacks. In March 2020, Ansar al-Sunna killed six defence and security forces and seized the police command centre. Militants in masks posed in front of the building and waved the black flag of ISIS.¹² The Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) claimed responsibility for attacks committed by Ansar al-Sunna including on 7 April 2020, when militants seized territory in the town of Namawanda in Muidumbe. ISCAP also claimed responsibility for attacks in the Democratic Republic of Congo, revealing IS’s ambition to monopolise Islamist extremism in Africa.

It also signals that Cabo Delgado represents just one piece of the Ansar al-Sunna-ISCAP strategy, where the ultimate goal would be to establish territory across Mozambique and its neighbouring countries.

Ansar al-Sunna’s campaign in 2020 is vastly different to 2019, and the group appears to have evolved dramatically since 2018. With 14 per cent of attacks now aimed at military positions and double the rate of attacks, it reveals a significant shift in its insurgency. It is strengthening at rapid pace and establishing territory beyond its base of Mocimboa de Praia.

Affiliation to ISIS and IS-Central Africa Province

Ansar al-Sunna’s affiliation to ISIS is worrying. The relationship can be traced back to April 2018, when 90 al-Shabaab defectors switched allegiance to ISIS and reportedly infiltrated northern Mozambique, through the islands of Zanzibar and Tanzania. Thereafter, rumours of Ansar al-Sunna’s affiliation with ISIS began.¹³ In June 2018, ISIS issued its first claim of responsibility for an attack in the country. ISIS continued to claim Ansar al-Sunna’s attacks under its ISCAP structure from that point.

In April 2019, a South African newspaper reported that about 90 ISIS fighters had infiltrated northern Mozambique.¹⁵ The African Union announced the following month that intelligence sources had confirmed that ISIS operatives were established in four African countries, including Mozambique.¹⁵ Ansar al-Sunna's link with ISIS became clear as the group's violence and propaganda grew.

Acceptance of a pledge of allegiance (bay'a) by ISIS or al-Qaeda can enhance a group's campaign significantly including through access to additional funding via their international financial networks. The funding is used to sustain day-to-day operations as well as to procure weapons and other illegal goods. As an example, the group al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) reportedly earned more than \$100 million a year in ransom, drugs and weapons trafficking throughout the Sahel.¹⁶ These funds helped consolidate the group in the past decade as well as support the formation of JNIM, which the AQIM faction now spearheads.

Affiliation to ISIS also allows Ansar al-Sunna to be regionally and internationally recognised as a viable Islamist actor. The status can attract fighters from ISIS operations around the world and increase local legitimacy by those who have sympathies with the group. ISIS often conducts "due diligence" of groups, assessing whether they are equipped with the appropriate leadership, resources and capacity. Once the group has passed the litmus test, ISIS accepts the group as part of an official operation or province (wiliyat). ISGS, which was originally a breakaway faction of al-Mourabitoun, had to wait more than 18 months to be accepted as a formal affiliate of ISIS. After several successful attacks, the group were finally deemed "worthy" and recognised by ISIS.

Domestic and International Response

In 2018, the Government of Mozambique (GoM) announced the approval of additional counter-terrorism legislation under a new law, the "Legal Regime for Repression and Combating Terrorism". The law adds articles to the penal code that provides for the punishment of anyone committing, planning or participating in terrorist acts, as well as for those who provide or receive training for terrorist purposes.

It also stipulates punishment for individuals who travel or attempt to travel to join a terrorist organisation, as well as those who facilitate such travel.

Maputo has also identified border security as a significant challenge, including the need to enhance security screening at official land border posts, particularly with Tanzania, to increase its ability to deter illegal overland or maritime entry through unofficial border-crossing points. Weak border controls facilitate the entry of individuals with links to global terrorist organisations into Mozambique. In 2018, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) supported the GoM in capacity-building on integrated border management at key air and land border points in the southern region of the country. The programme delivers US-funded equipment for use in verifying travel documents at border control points, strengthening Mozambique's ability to protect national borders and combat transnational organised crime. Similar measures are needed in the northern border with Tanzania and along the coastal districts of Cabo Delgado, where illicit trafficking routes are established, and which militants often use as arrival points.

Additional measures taken by the GoM include the closure of mosques affiliated with Ansar al-Sunna. However, the implementation of these measures has impacted the wider Muslim community. In the context of other communal concerns, this has compounded grievances with the GoM. In some cases, this has eroded trust with state actors and bolstered community support for Ansar al-Sunna.

So far, the GoM has led all counter terrorism and extremism efforts in Mozambique with some support from the international community. However, President Nyusi and Defence Minister Neto continue to assert the need for greater foreign assistance and that Ansar al-Sunna remains a threat to national security. In 2018, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed with Egypt, India and Russia, which could work to support Mozambique security with training and resources to combat Islamist extremists. In May 2019, Mozambique signed an MoU with the UK to enhance defence cooperation.

Attacks have intensified since the start of 2020 leading to a number of efforts to mobilise international support.

EXPLAINER: ORIGINS, IDEOLOGY AND AMBITIONS OF ANSAR AL-SUNNA

Ansar al-Sunna (Helpers of Traditions [of Prophet Muhammad]), started out as a religious organisation in 2015 in the northern Mozambican port town of Mocimboa da Praia. It was founded by a group of young men; some had studied in Islamic schools in Somalia or had links with Salafi groups in Tanzania and Kenya. Initially calling themselves *Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jamaa* (Adherents to the Traditions [of Prophet Muhammad] and the Community), the group erected mosques and preached a puritanical version of Islam.

At first, it advocated the “purification” of Islam from the practices of the mystic traditions of Muslim Sufis, who form the majority of Muslims in Mozambique, labelling them degenerate.¹⁷ Sufis in Islam are characterised by their emphasis on self over social transformation, spiritual development over legalism, and contemplation over action. Salafis regard Sufi practices as un-Islamic innovations. The group’s vilification of Sufis led to Sufi-Salafi tensions. This was evident in the rhetoric heard in mosques and other public places in Cabo Delgado. Each side insisted that theirs was the correct interpretation of Islam.

Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jamaa’s narrative hardened as sectarian tensions escalated and the group fell into a dispute with authorities over its radical interpretations of Islam and characterisation of Sufi Muslims. These exclusivist views crystallised further when the group incorporated the followers of Aboud Rogo Mohammed,¹⁸ the leader of al-Hijra, a Kenyan group allied with al-Shabaab in Somalia. Rogo Mohammed, who was killed in 2012, was on the UN and US sanction lists for allegedly “providing financial, material, logistical, or technical support to al-Shabaab” in addition to fundraising and the recruitment of Swahili-speaking fighters.¹⁹ When Rogo Mohammed was killed in a drive-by shooting in August 2012 shortly after he was sanctioned, his supporters accused Kenyan authorities of assassinating him.

Riots broke out in Mombasa, where he was based, culminating in the death of one person and attacks on churches.²⁰ As more riots and killings followed, Kenyan authorities exerted pressure on Rogo Mohammed’s supporters. Some members joined al-Shabaab in Somalia while others moved south into Tanzania. By 2016 some had crossed over into Cabo Delgado province of Mozambique.²¹

This contact with Rogo Mohammed’s followers proved formative for the group. As the stalemate with authorities and Sufis continued, the group rebranded as Ansar al-Sunna (helpers of the teachings [of the Prophet Muhammad]). It started calling for the implementation of shariah law in the Cabo Delgado region and refused to recognise Mozambican law, saying it was man-made and un-Islamic. The group rejected state institutions such as schools and hospitals, refused to pay taxes and told supporters not to vote in elections or send their children to state-run schools. Ansar al-Sunna armed members with light weapons and started physically attacking state institutions and harassing local people. This earned the militia its local nickname, al-Shabaab, a nod to the Somali based al-Qaeda affiliate.

In a development that gives a deeper insight into the group’s ideology, modus operandi and ambitions, Ansar al-Sunna released a video in January 2018 featuring six Islamists dressed in civilian clothing, five of them brandishing AK-47 rifles. One of the commanders spoke in Mozambique’s official language, Portuguese, while citing Quranic verses in Arabic, to declare that the group’s aim is to overthrow the Mozambican government and replace it with a society that follows sharia law. He contended that their cause has divine support and will therefore succeed and called their “brothers” to join them in their fight against the “devils” who go against the Quran. He also claimed responsibility for the October 2017 attack, which he said was intended to establish Islamic doctrines and law.²²

At the 33rd African Union summit in February 2020, member states acknowledged the growing threat posed by the insurgency in northern Mozambique. The Peace and Security Commission is considering intelligence sharing and military training assistance that could be provided; AU Commissioner Smail Chergui said the AU could help the country to “understand the phenomenon in order to ‘respond holistically.’” In May 2020, at the Southern African Development Community’s (SADC) Extraordinary Organ Troika Summit, delegates took the first steps to formulate a regional counter-terrorism strategy.

Regional efforts have been amplified on the global stage. In April 2020 the EU Council expressed concern about the “visible deterioration of [the] security situation in the province of Cabo Delgado” and called for “effective action to protect citizens, carry out investigations to bring those responsible to justice and to identify the role played by violent extremist groups”. The EU offered to “continue and intensify dialogue with national authority” and “reiterated its readiness to assist Mozambique”.²³

US-sponsored initiatives underway in Mozambique include a grant programme to promote constructive dialogue between local residents and youth, religious leaders and security forces in Cabo Delgado through the Islamic Council; a baseline assessment and strategic communications programme to assist key stakeholders with more effective youth messaging and outreach; the provision of US logistics and communications advisors to support the Mozambican government’s efforts; programmes to help build the capacity of civilian law enforcement to engage with affected communities and investigate suspected acts of terrorism; and a \$2 million USAID programme to mitigate drivers of instability through efforts to increase youth economic and civic empowerment in Cabo Delgado.²⁴

Between July 2019 and March 2020, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) facilitated a terrorism prevention engagement programme, which led to the creation of a new Counter-Terrorism Unit in the National Criminal Investigation Service in the country. This included training workshops for key investigators, defence officials, prosecutors and judges in northern Mozambique to support their work in countering violent extremism and bringing terrorists to justice. Mozambique had been identified by UNODC as a priority country for the rapid deployment of surge capacity.²⁵

Since the world’s largest offshore gas field was discovered off Cabo Delgado in 2011, global energy groups have committed themselves to significant investment in the country. In February 2019, 15 militants opened fire on an Anardarko petroleum convoy and killed one contractor. Several attacks have occurred near liquified natural gas (LNG) installations since. While the Covid-19 pandemic triggered Exxon Mobil to delay a \$30 billion investment to a Mozambican LNG project, the upsurge in violence will cause further challenges to the energy sector.

The Islamist insurgency in Cabo Delgado is beginning to outpace Maputo’s counter-extremism efforts. The security services are struggling to counter or contain the insurgency and are allegedly suffering from low morale. More than 150,000 people have been displaced by the violence in Cabo Delgado, with large numbers facing food shortages as farmers abandon their land due to safety concerns. As Ansar al-Sunna continues to consolidate its insurgency, Cabo Delgado is at risk of suffering long-term economic, social and humanitarian setbacks. Ansar al-Sunna is now perpetrating attacks at a rate similar to insurgencies in the Sahel, Lake Chad Basin and Horn of Africa. To truly prepare a robust response to Ansar al-Sunna activities, international state-actors need to support Maputo militarily and logistically.

Recommendations

The Islamist insurgency in Cabo Delgado poses threats on multiple fronts. Ansar al-Sunna's insurgency is escalating in pace and sophistication and garnering greater support and recognition from ISIS and global jihadi networks. The Government of Mozambique has taken steps to escalate its response to the crisis and has called for regional and international support to fight the group.

International policymakers should consider the following responses to the immediate challenge posed by Ansar al-Sunna:

1. **Establish mechanisms to support national, regional and international coordination:** Because Ansar al-Sunna is a home-grown insurgency amplified by transnational networks, support and expertise – and backed by the global Salafi-jihadi movement – meeting the challenge posed by the group will require national, regional and global coordination and cooperation. Building on the experience of responses in the Lake Chad Basin and the Sahel, policymakers should call for a coordinated response and establish mechanisms to facilitate cooperation. This should include international support for the implementation of a Mozambican CVE National Action Plan covering both immediate and long-term responses to counter and prevent Islamist extremism.
2. **Sanctions:** The international community should act swiftly to impede international support for Ansar al-Sunna through the use of sanctions. The US, UK and EU should join the United Nations in designating the group a terrorist organisation with key persons affiliated with the group also placed on sanctions lists. Furthermore, the Eastern and Southern Africa Anti-Money Laundering Group (ESAAMLG) should expand to monitor the financial activities of Ansar al-Sunna, similar to how the FATF and GIABA work to stem terror financing in the Sahel.
3. **Training and technical support:** The US, UK, EU and other actors should provide technical support and training to Mozambican officials in the military, police and judiciary. As an example, the EU could extend support from the EU Capacity and Assistance Programme to include Mozambique and provide peacekeeping and conflict resolution training to police and security officials.
4. **Military equipment, hardware and troop deployments:** The international community should consider other forms of direct military assistance to Cabo Delgado.
5. **Humanitarian crisis:** There is an urgent need for greater coordination in the humanitarian sector to support victims and internationally displaced people affected by Ansar al-Sunna.

Policymakers should consider the following measures to counter the longer-term threats represented by Islamist extremism in Cabo Delgado:

1. **Prevention and rehabilitation:** Acknowledge the long-term and complex nature of extremism through inclusion of systemic interventions in a CVE National Action Plan. This should include preventative measures as well as exit pathways out of Islamist groups.
2. **Counter-narratives:** Support thorough inquiry into the ideological narratives of Ansar al-Sunna to enable the development of robust counter-narratives to integrate into government communication campaigns and rehabilitation training programmes.
3. **Socio-economic drivers:** Support the Government of Mozambique to address underlying socio-economic drivers of extremism in Cabo Delgado through targeted developmental, educational and vocational interventions.

Appendix

Response to initial attack in 2017

Ansar al-Sunna started attacking local Muslims in 2015, two years before it became an organised, violent extremist group. Its first large-scale, coordinated attack came on 5 October 2017, when around 30 militants stormed three police stations in the town of Mocimboa da Praia. Seventeen people were killed, including two police officers and a community leader. Militants seized police weapons and ammunition.

The attack sent shockwaves through the Mozambican authorities and the wider region. Maputo responded with widespread arrests of suspected members and sympathisers. Some 300 people were detained within months of the assault. Mosques suspected to be related to the group were first closed and later dismantled by the government – a measure condemned by some Muslim leaders in the country, who contended such actions would create “bad feelings within the Muslim community.”²⁶

More skirmishes, attacks and arrests followed, including the assassination of the country’s national director of reconnaissance of the riot police. In December 2017, authorities named two Mozambicans, Nuro Adremane and Jafar Alawi, as suspected organisers of the October attacks. The district government revealed that both Adremane and Alawi studied Islam in Tanzania, Sudan and Saudi Arabia, where they allegedly also received military training.

Authorities gave the group one week to surrender and turn in their weapons in exchange for amnesty, an offer Ansar al-Sunna rejected. On 24 and 25 December,²⁷ at the expiration of the ultimatum, two helicopters and a navy ship shelled Mutumbate, a town believed to be the bastion of the insurgents. Fifty people were killed. In January 2017, Maputo signed an agreement with the Kremlin to step up military and technical cooperation, including “deliveries of arms and military equipment, as well as other military-oriented products, spare parts and components” to fight terrorism.²⁸ It also entered into similar agreements with neighbouring Tanzania, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda to set up a regional military command and deploy more troops to the affected region to fight the group.²⁹

Endnotes

- 1 The RENAMO Military Junta is a nationalist militia breakaway group previously affiliated with the main opposition party in Mozambique.
- 2 “Islamic State Replaces al-Qaeda as Enemy No. 1 in Sahel” (France24, 15 January 2020), <https://www.france24.com/en/20200115-islamic-state-replaces-al-qaeda-as-enemy-no-1-in-sahel>
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