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UNVEILING THE SURGE OF TERRORISM: ANALYSING EAST AFRICA'S BATTLE AGAINST EXTREMISM, SPOTLIGHT ON MOZAMBIQUE

Abstract

The goal of this article is to show the growing threat of terrorism in the so-called East African corridor. Leaky borders in Africa allow terrorist groups to spread beyond the borders of the country in which they are established. An example of this is the province of Cabo Delgado in Mozambique, where Ansar al-Sunna, also known as 'Al-Shabaab of Cabo Delgado', has begun to control it. The weakness of the state and their institutions makes the fight against extremists difficult, posing a serious threat to international and regional security.

Key words

Ansar al-Sunna, Cabo Delgado, Al Shabab, terrorism, Mozambique

Introduction

The rise of transnational extremist organisations and their proliferation in Africa has contributed to the growing insecurity on the continent for more than two decades. Organisations such as Al-Shabaab are spreading from Somalia to Kenya or Boko Haram, which is not only active in northern Nigeria but also around Lake Chad¹. The presence of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) across Africa demonstrates the fluid nature of contemporary conflicts and shows that these groups represent one of the most important challenges to peace and security on the continent.

Problems with leaky borders, rapid urbanisation, an overabundance of young people, scarcity of resources or high migration have allowed for the regionalisation of conflict regimes and may continue to do so in the future². The proliferation of terrorist organisations across national borders, create flashpoints or collaborations between local and international extremist organisations. These developments make it necessary for African governments to create a common set of security challenges. The creation of the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) or the G5 Sahel Joint Force can be seen

as such solutions³. A marked spread of Islamic extremist activity can be observed along the so-called “East Africa Corridor” – an area stretching from Somalia to Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique and South Africa⁴. One group that has carried out numerous terrorist attacks in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania is Al-Shabaab. Since 2005, this group has waged an insurgency against the Federal Government of Somalia and the force of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Largely by linking up with local terrorist groups, Al-Shabaab has expanded its reach beyond Somalia’s borders⁵.

Countries such as Mozambique and South Africa, which until now have been considered areas isolated from the threat of terrorism, have recently seen a significant increase in extremist activity. In Mozambique, Islamist extremism is emerging in the northern provinces of Cado Delgado, Niassa and Nampula. In South Africa, on the other hand, there are acts of aggression not only by Islamists, but also by far-right groups⁶. The ineffectiveness of conventional counter-terrorism approaches, often combined with draconian security tactics that violate civil liberties and exacerbate grievances, has resulted in a shift. This shift includes strategies, policies

1 S. Mets, *How to handle the threat of an expanding Islamic State in Africa*, “World Politics Review” <https://www.world-politicsreview.com/how-to-manage-the-threat-of-an-expanding-islamic-state-in-africa/> [access: 14.06.2019].

2 *Preventing and Responding to Violent Extremism in Africa: A Development Approach*. United Nations Development Programme, 2016.

3 S. Nkomo, S. Buchanan-Clarke, *Violent extremism in Africa Popular assessments from the ‘Eastern Corridor’*, “Afrobarometer Policy Paper” 2020, No. 65.

4 *Global Terrorism Index 2019: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, Sydney 2019 <http://visionofhumanity.org/reports> [access: 12.03.2024].

5 *Assessing Al-Shabaab’s Threat to the Region as Somalia Joins the East* <https://acleddata.com/2023/12/08/special-report-kenya-somalia-assessing-al-shabaabs-threat-to-the-region-as-somalia-joins-the-east-africa-community/> [access: 12.03.2024].

6 See: P. Fabricius, *Is Islamic State taking charge of Mozambique’s jihadist insurgency?* “Institute for Security Studies” 2020.

and initiatives aimed at disrupting 'pathways to radicalisation' as well as confronting the underlying socio-economic factors fuelling violent extremism.

Methodological and Methodical Assumptions

This study employs a multifaceted approach to analyse the surge of terrorism in East Africa, focusing on Cabo Delgado in Mozambique. By integrating political, social, economic, and cultural perspectives, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of terrorism's root causes and implications.

Cabo Delgado is examined as a case study to understand the specific factors enabling Ansar al-Sunna, also known as 'Al-Shabaab of Cabo Delgado', to gain control. The study looks at historical grievances, socio-economic conditions, and the fragility of state institutions. It also uses a comparative framework to identify common patterns and unique elements across similar regions in East Africa. A mixed-methods approach combines qualitative data from interviews and policy analyses with quantitative data on terrorist incidents and economic indicators. Reliable sources, including academic journals, reports, media articles, and firsthand accounts, are used to ensure credibility.

Through this methodology, the study aims to unravel how Ansar al-Sunna gained control in Cabo Delgado, considering socio-economic conditions, historical grievances, and weak state institutions, while also addressing the impact

of porous borders. This comprehensive analysis aims to inform policies and strategies to enhance regional security and stability amidst rising extremist threats.

Ideological Roots: Unpacking Extremist Narratives in East Africa

As some scholars have argued, Islamism has become a totalitarian ideology that attempts to influence the formation of the Islamic religious tradition for the purpose of political domination. This process is undoubtedly influenced by many external and internal factors. Among others, the activities of religious foundations in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries spreading extremist interpretations of Islam in mosques, madrassas or Muslim youth centres in East Africa. These activities contributed to widespread polarisation between societies and further fuelled inter-religious violence. In addition, further polarisation was encouraged by governments that carried out repressive actions that victimised entire Muslim communities⁷.

In Somalia, Al-Shabaab, the main Islamist extremist group, was born in 2005 during the country's decline after two decades of conflict. It has since become a powerful insurgent force, continuing to fight Somali government forces and AMISOM, which has 22,000 troops. After more than a decade, Al-Shabaab still maintains an effective strategy of asymmetric warfare and the number of terrorist attacks continues to have tragic consequences, claiming the

⁷ More: H. Solomon, *Accounting for the rise and trajectory of Islamist extremism in Africa*, [in:] *Extremisms in Africa*, A. Tschudin, S. Buchanan-Clarke, L. Coutts, S. T. Russell, M. Tyala (eds.), Johannesburg 2018.

lives of thousands of citizens and members of the armed forces⁸.

The terrorist group Al-Shabaab is expanding its activities to other East African countries. Initially the aim was to recruit new fighters or raise funds. However, Al-Shabaab has been carrying out attacks in retaliation for the deployment of Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) and AMISOM in Somalia since 2010. Al-Shabaab seeks to portray itself as defenders of the Muslim community (umma) against regional authorities referred to as unbelievers (kuffar)³.

In Uganda, there has been a noticeable phenomenon of local recruitment by Al-Shabaab, highlighted by the involvement of several Ugandan nationals in the 2010 Kampala bombings. Similarly, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) have recruited Ugandans in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). These Ugandans increasingly adopt radical jihadist rhetoric and publicly declare an alliance with the Islamic State as well as other international organisations of a similar nature⁹.

Another example of rising extremism in East Africa is the terrorist attacks perpetrated by the Ansar Muslim Youth Centre (Ansar Sunni) and other local organisations in Tanzania. In 2011, attacks were carried out against ruling party officials, local officials

or police. The following years also saw attacks on churches, entertainment centres, priests and tourists¹⁰. In 2015, more enhanced attacks began to be carried out against local security forces in the coastal regions of Tanga, Mtwara and Pwani¹¹.

Al-Shabaab uses its links with groups in Tanzania as a safe haven, offering refuge to Kenyans fleeing local repression and as a source of potential recruitment from among disaffected youth. This is mainly concentrated in the Pwani area, where anti-state sentiment is particularly pronounced. Currently, Tanzanians make up the second largest group of foreigners in the ranks of Al-Shabaab, just behind Kenyans¹².

Between 2013 and 2015, Kenyan fighters fled to Tanzania, evading repression by Kenyan security forces. Similarly, Tanzanian fighters withdrew to remote areas such as the Rufiji region and cross the southern border into northern Mozambique since 2016. This move has contributed to a growing Islamist rebellion and escalating the violence in Mozambique's northern provinces¹³.

In October 2017, thirty militants attacked three police stations in Mocimboa da Praia, Cabo Delgado. Since then, the group known as Ansar al-Sunnah, or Ahlu Sunnah Wal-Jamâa (ASWJ), has been carrying out violent

8 Conflict With Al-Shabaab in Somalia. Centre for Preventive Action <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/al-shabab-somalia> [access:14.02.2024].

9 See: M. Bryden, *The reinvention of Al-Shabaab: A strategy of choice or necessity?*, "Center for Strategic & International Studies" 2014.

10 A. LeSage, *The rising terrorism threat in Tanzania: Domestic islamist militancy and regional threats*, Warszawa 2014.

11 U.S. State Department. Country reports on terrorism 2017 – Tanzania <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2017/> [access:14.02.2024].

12 See: M. Harper, *Everything you told me is true: The many faces of Al-Shabaab*, London 2019.

13 *Al-Shabaab five years after Westgate: Still a menace in East Africa*, "Africa Report" 2018, No. 265.

attacks against the population and security facilities, aiming to overthrow the National Islamic Council and establish the Islamic State. Those arrested with links to terrorist activities include nationals from Mozambique, Tanzania, Somalia, Uganda, South Africa and Gambia. The group's leaders have links to Islamist organisations in Kenya, Somalia and Tanzania as well as to religious leaders from Saudi Arabia, Libya, Sudan and Algeria¹⁴.

The insurgency has escalated significantly since March 2020. Approximately every week there were dozens of attacks on both government and civilian targets. One incident included the seizure of army barracks and a police station in March 2020. ASWJ militants have released a video of them waving the Islamic State (IS) black flag and calling for the establishment of Sharia law throughout the country¹⁵.

The emergence of ASWJ in northern Mozambique has raised concerns among South African security analysts. Despite the absence of direct terrorist attacks in South Africa, the country has been used by Islamic extremist groups for logistical purposes. In the past three years, three individuals or groups have been charged with terrorist activities, with South African defendants allegedly having links to IS operatives in East Africa¹⁶.

Unveiling Northern Mozambique's Crisis: Extremism and Insecurity

The aforementioned ever-growing insurgency in Northern Mozambique attracted worldwide attention since March 2020. Ansar al-Sunna, sometime referred to as the "Al Shabab of Cabo Delgado", began to control the province of Cabo Delgado, which was a stronghold of the ruling party FRELIMO. Furthermore, in this impoverished region, Muslims predominate. Ansar al-Sunna's dominance was established through a group of young radicals from Cabo Delgado rallying in opposition to local Sufi Islam and the Salafist National Council of Islam in Mozambique. Their actions escalated from the destruction of mosques to the creation of a military organisation based in the Quirimbas National Park. In October 2017, they first attracted attention with an attack on three police stations in Mocímboa da Praia¹⁷.

In 2018, more attacks became increasingly random and macabre, with the kidnapping of women, the slaughter of villagers and beheadings. Among other things, terrorists perpetrated an attack on personnel working for Anadarko, a US-based oil exploration corporation, resulting in a temporary suspension of construction of a liquefied natural gas plant. In April 2020, Ansar al-Sunna leader Bwana Omar once again announced that his goal was

14 *Islamic State claims Mozambique attacks close to gas projects* <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mozambique-insurgency/islamic-state-claims-mozambique-attack-close-to-gas-projects-idUSKBN21C0ON/> [access:14.02.2024].

15 *'We are dying': Residents lament attacks in northern Mozambique.* <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/24/we-are-dying-residents-lament-attacks-in-northern-mozambique> [access:14.02.2024].

16 *Militant cells lying low in South Africa, minister says* <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-safrica-security-%20idUSKB-N13614C/> [access:14.02.2024].

17 P. Israel, *Making sense of Mozambique's brutal insurgency* <https://mg.co.za/africa/2020-05-04-making-sense-of-mozambiques-brutal-insurgency> [access:17.02.2024].

to establish a Sharia administration in Cabo Delgado¹⁸.

These attacks contributed to insecurity among the local population and contributed to mass displacement. Mozambique's security forces have responded strongly, repeating tactics used in other African conflict zones such as Somalia, the Lake Chad basin, the Sahel and the Maghreb. However, this approach has created mistrust among local residents, resulting in protests in Palma, Cabo Delgado¹⁹.

Moreover, these developments raise a number of concerns such as Ansar al-Sunna's links to the Islamic State, the impact of international energy interests, the limitations of Mozambican security forces and the involvement of transnational criminal networks in terrorist financing. These issues require serious regional and international attention.

Security Threats Loom Over Mozambique's Liquefied Natural Gas Projects

In 2012, US energy company Anadarko discovered a large gas deposit off the coast of Cabo Delgado in the Rovuma Basin. Subsequently, European multi-

national oil and gas company Eni also discovered a huge gas field in the area. International energy giants are working on promising offshore liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects in Cabo Delgado. Eight LNG projects with a total liquefaction capacity of 44 million tonnes are underway in Mozambique. It is assumed that Mozambique could become one of the world's top ten LNG producers by 2025²⁰. These projects are expected to significantly boost Mozambique's economy, potentially alleviating poverty.

Thanks to the convenient geographical location of the gas fields, the LNG projects are well placed to meet the needs of the Atlantic and Asia-Pacific markets and to take advantage of the growing energy demand in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent²¹. Major companies involved in offshore exploration in Cabo Delgado include TotalEnergies, Eni, Exxon Mobil, BP, Shell and CNPC²².

However, the escalation of violence since early 2020 has raised concerns about the future of these investments and even put them at high risk²³. Moreover, violence from Islamist rebels reached Palma in March 2021, causing the deaths of dozens of people during a four-day attack by hundreds

18 C. Casola, A. Iocchi, *The 'faceless evildoers' of Cabo Delgado: An Islamist insurgency in Mozambique?* <https://www.is0pionline.it/en/publicazione/faceless-evildoers-cabo-delgado-islamist-insurgency-mozambique-27154> [access:18.02.2024].

19 G. Pirio, R. Pittelli, Y. Adam, *The many drivers enabling violent extremism in northern Mozambique* <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/the-many-drivers-enabling-violent-extremism-in-northern-mozambique> [access:14.02.2024].

20 G. Goodrich, *Financing LNG in Mozambique* <https://www.africaoilandpower.com/about/what-is-aop> [access:17.02.2024].

21 *Mozambique LNG* <https://www.mzlng.total.com/en/about-mozambique-liquefied-natural-gas-project> [access:17.02.2024].

22 S. Qekeleshe, *Mozambique: The next great LNG player* <https://www.africaoilandpower.com/2020/03/20/mozambique-the-nextgreat-lng-player> [access:19.02.2024].

23 N. Craig, *Jihadist insurgency crisis could spill over into KZN, warn analysts* <https://www.iol.co.za/sunday-tribune/jihadist-insurgency-crisis-could-spill-over-into-kzn-warn-analysts-48747883> [access:14.02.2024].

of militants²⁴. In addition, media reported that in May 2024 armed groups attacked Macomia in Cobo Delgado leading to serious escalation in violence. The attack underscores the fragility of the security situation as international oil companies like TotalEnergies and ExxonMobil seek to resume operations. The surge in violence threatens regional stability, with calls for a comprehensive response from regional and international actors²⁵.

Securing Mozambique: Confronting Terrorism's Threat

In March 2023, Ansar al-Sunna has attacked military and police installations for the first time. This behaviour was different from previous acts of terror that focused primarily on civilians. The group also began distributing food to local communities, which contributed to a more open attitude towards the extremist group, especially in the face of growing reluctance towards energy exploitation in the region²⁶.

The Mozambican security forces that were supposed to face the extremists consisted mainly of special police forces, but they were proved too weak in the fight against the extremists. Mozambican security forces were

unable to adequately protect the civilian population. In addition, the media reported serious human rights violations in communities in Cabo Delgado by Mozambican armed forces²⁷. In order to remove extremists from the region, Mozambique hired the Wagner Group, a private Russian military company. However, the involvement of the Wagner group has only increased the activity of radical forces in the region²⁸. Nonetheless, neither the military action nor the use of mercenaries has stopped the violence, and reports of escalating brutality have prompted international condemnation.

The devastating attack on Palma in 2021, in which hundreds of local and foreign contractors were killed, forced the government in Maputo to accept troops from South Africa to strengthen its weak, undisciplined army. The result was the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM). The arrival of South African troops also coincided with the deployment of Rwandan soldiers to provide security surrounding the TotalEnergies' gas project. Rwandan soldiers also managed to retake Mocímboa da Praia, which they still patrol today. According to statistics, the combined campaign reduced the number of insurgents from around 3,000 to just 300²⁹.

24 L. Louw-Vaudran, *What peace in Cabo Delgado means for Mozambique and its neighbours*, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/whatpeace-in-cabo-delgado-means-for-mozambique-and-its-neighbours> [access:19.02.2024].

25 F. Jaloun, *Mozambique: Insurgency in Cabo Delgado* <https://theowp.org/mozambique-insurgency-in-cabo-delgado/> [access:19.02.2024].

26 J. Hall, *Mozambique's energy sector caught in southern Africa's first terrorist insurgency*. <https://www.inonafrica.com/2020/06/02/mozambiques-energy-sector-caught-in-southern-africas-first-terrorist-insurgency> [access:19.02.2024].

27 L. Schlein, *Anarchy reigns in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado as conflict escalates* <https://www.voanews.com/africa/anarchy-reigns-mozambiques-cabo-delgado-conflict-escalates> [access:14.02.2024].

28 P. Fabricius, *Wagner private military force licks wounds in northern Mozambique* <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-11-29-wagner-private-military-force-licks-wounds-in-northern-mozambique> [access:14.02.2024].

29 M. Elias, P. Bax, *What Future for Military Intervention in Mozambique?* <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/east-and-southern-africa/mozambique/what-future-military-intervention-mozambique> [access:18.02.2024].

However, in January 2024, SADC announced plans to withdraw its forces at the end of its current mandate on 15 July. Botswana and Lesotho withdrew in April, while Angola and Namibia are already leaving the region. South Africa, which contributed with two-thirds of the mission's forces, was originally scheduled to bring its soldiers home in the coming weeks. However, in a surprise move, Pretoria on 23 April announced that it would keep its forces in Cabo Delgado until the end of the year, although not as part of a mission to combat the militants. Another 200 personnel will remain until March 2025 to monitor 'illegal maritime activities' along the Mozambican coast. In April, Rwanda also announced plans to increase its deployment of 2,500 troops under a secret agreement with Maputo. Sources providing information to Crisis Group report that Tanzania also intends to maintain between 400 and 500 of its troops in Mozambique, mainly to secure the 860-kilometre border between the two countries³⁰.

Conclusion

A serious threat to the security of governments and nations across the African continent is violent extremism. Over the past 20 years, we have seen national terrorist groups emerging which increasingly begun to cross borders, thereby creating complex, and often difficult to resolve, regional conflict systems. In Mozambique and South Africa, among

others, there has been an increase in terrorist activity as Al-Shabaab has managed to move beyond its Somali roots and become a regional organisation. The impact of terrorism should not only be measured by the number of victims and material damage, but also by the profound effects it can have on society as a whole.

The extremist group Ansar al-Sunna, which operates in the Cabo Delgado province of Mozambique, undoubtedly poses a serious security challenge. Although the group is not officially recognised as a terrorist organisation, it uses similar militant tactics to Boko Haram in Nigeria. Indeed, Ansar al-Sunna operates in underdeveloped and impoverished areas, exacerbating local grievances and perpetuating violence. An opportunity for development in Mozambique is the vast gas deposits in Cabo Delgado province. Unfortunately, the massive displacement of the local population and suspicions of local government corruption have exacerbated social discontent, thus creating fertile ground for militant groups. Furthermore, Mozambique's armed forces are largely incapable of providing effective protection to the community. Despite foreign assistance, including the controversial deployment of groups such as Russia's Wagner Group, militant activity persists. Importantly, the region's vulnerability to organised crime, including smuggling and drug trafficking, exacerbates instability. In summary, Ansar al-Sunna's activities in Cabo

30 L. Ndebele, *SA-led SAMIM leaves Mozambique's Cabo Delgado after some success, but a job not yet completed* <https://www.news24.com/news24/africa/news/sa-led-samim-leaves-mozambiques-cabo-delgado-after-some-success-but-a-job-not-yet-completed-20240514> [access: 14.05.2024].

Delgado, combined with governance challenges and security vulnerabilities, make the region increasingly attractive to extremist activity, posing a serious threat to international and regional security.

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