

Mozambique's Security Troubles: A Portent for Southern Africa

The security threat in Mozambique is an ominous threat that warrants not only a national but international response. If left unabated, the growing threat is likely to [imperil human security and development](#) in Southern Africa. The 24 [March 2021 attacks in Palma](#), a town in Mozambique's northernmost province of Cabo Delgado, has received widespread attention because of its scope, the number and the nationalities of the victims of the attacks: those killed and those trapped in or fleeing the province. A sizeable number of these victims are foreign nationals. [According to the Mozambican government](#), dozens of innocent people were killed in the dramatic attacks. Some were intercepted while trying to flee the volatile region. Seven people, who formed part of a convoy fleeing Palma, [were killed in an ambush](#). Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama (ASWJ), a local Islamic group also known as Al-Shabaab, which has pledged allegiance to ISIL, has been these attacks' villain since 2017. In October 2017, about 30 terrorists [attacked three police stations](#) in Mocímboa da Praia, a port city in Cabo Delgado. They have in the past also seized the town of Quissanga. The bold attacks on these strategic towns demonstrate that the insurgents have moved a step up from attacking isolated individuals to more [complex raids](#).

The insurgency forms part of a rapidly growing fundamentalist terrorism, whose fervour has been appealing to disenchanting individuals, as well as groups where terrorist groups have set up tentacles. ASWJ emerged in 2014 in the port district of Mocímboa da Praia. Some youths broke away from local mosques and established their own mosques with their own doctrine, promising members jobs and scholarships. They reportedly drew on the ideology of a Tanzanian, Abdul Chacur, who advocates

for an extremists brand of Islam which is diametrically opposed to coexistence with and democracy. The group has grown chiefly by enticing militants with financial incentives, while more members are recruited "[through family ties and radical mosques, where funds are also provided to new recruits.](#)" Thus, the group has grown mainly because of religious fundamentalism but also due to the failure of the government of Mozambique to cater for many of its disillusioned youth. As in many places where terrorist zealotry has won many converts and forced affiliates, Cabo Delgado Province is desperately poor, despite being host to massive gas reserves. The hitherto lacklustre and indolent response of the Mozambican government has emboldened the insurgency, which is now a threat not only to Mozambique but to Southern Africa. Mozambique's record of dealing with insurgency has been uninspiring. For instance, when the attacks started in 2017, the government's initial stance was to dismiss them as [isolated incidents of banditry](#). Since its independence in 1975, the country has struggled to deal with insurgency from RENAMO, which was supported by the Rhodesian and apartheid regimes.

According to the [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project \(ACLED\)](#), from October 2017 to March 2021, there have been 831 events of organised violence in Cabo Delgado, with about 2,658 fatalities reported from organised violence, while about 700,000 people have been displaced since the havoc started. More than the terror attacks, Mozambique has more formidable challenges. "An estimated [three million people](#) are projected to face high levels of food insecurity across the country due to the combined effects of the conflict in the North, weather shocks, and COVID-19 mitigation measures, which have restricted economic activity." Corruption by government officials is likely to compound the situation in Cabo Delgado. Prior to the 24 March attacks, there was a [food distribution incident](#) on 17 March which ended in gunfire. A crowd that gathered to receive food accused the distributors of

disregarding the ticketing system and instead keeping the food for their families and friends. Cases such as this only work to alienate locals from the government and to heighten their hostility towards the state. Once this feeling of alienation sets in, the people become susceptible to groups that promise an alternative to state institutions. In addition to issues of corruption, the government will also have to address the case of time-honoured social exclusion, especially of the Mwani ethnic groups inhabiting the regions affected by the rising terrorism. A military-only approach is likely to miss the deep structural issues underpinning the rising crisis. In addition, the discovery of major gas reserves has added another complication and possible accelerant for terrorist mobilisation among residents of Cabo Delgado. The presence of foreign companies extracting profits from the province, while the residents remain trapped in poverty, will most likely exacerbate the appeal of terrorist groups that are decidedly against the government.

As part of its response to the growing threat, the government has hired Dyck Advisory Group (DAG), a South African private security firm, which is also reportedly working in concert with Wagner from Russia. By hiring foreign private security companies, the Mozambican government has obliquely admitted at least two factors: one, that it has failed as a government to contain the insurgency and, secondly, that Mozambique does not have faith in state-led efforts by the Southern African Development Community (SADC). SADC [convened](#) an Extraordinary Organ Troika plus the Republic of Mozambique Summit of Heads of State and Government on 19 May 2020 in Zimbabwe to discuss the prevailing political and security situation in the region. Continued attacks are thus partly an indictment on how ineffectual SADC has been, thus creating some basis on which Mozambique enlisted the help of private firms.

It is noteworthy that, in their quest to appear worthy of their contracts, private security companies might be

overzealous in their activities and thus might be a menace even to ordinary citizens. The presence of foreign security firms and personnel might inflame the insurgents' antagonism towards the countries of origin of these security outfits. If this happens, the scope of the insurgency will likely assume a regional dimension. It is noteworthy that Cabo Delgado borders Tanzania, while other parts of Mozambique share borders with six other countries. South Africa, as Southern Africa's economic giant, is inevitably drawn into Mozambique's security situation. Some refugees fleeing from Mozambique are likely to spill over into neighbouring countries, with the relatively safe South Africa being a choice destination.

The disturbances in the Cabo Delgado Province of Mozambique are a major regional threat in Southern Africa. The case of Boko Haram in Nigeria is a salutary lesson on how fundamentalist terrorism can easily morph from being a national to a regional catastrophe. In addition, border management in Southern Africa has been tenuous for decades; hence the security threat in Mozambique could compel droves of Mozambicans, some of whom could have sympathies for terrorists, to stream through Southern African borders and cause both social and security challenges for the region.

The ideal scenario to deal with the rising threat would be a multipronged approach by SADC, as the regional body that is closest to the situation. A combat-oriented approach is not enough to address the situation. There should also be attempts to address structural issues. The progress of such an endeavour will be slow and arduous because structural and persistent poverty, coupled with a general disillusionment with state structures, is a common feature of Southern Africa, not only Mozambique. The proposed approach will also likely draw in players from outside the continent. Through Total's involvement in the gas deposits in Cabo Delgado, France is already a player of interest. On 15 March 2021, the governments of the Us and Mozambique launched a [two-month](#)

[Joint Combined Exchange Training \(JCET\)](#) programme. The US Special Operations Forces will train Mozambican marines for two months to support Mozambique's efforts to prevent the spread of terrorism and violent extremism. The US government also promised to provide medical and communication equipment. Thus, close cooperation between Mozambique, regional players, and the international system at large, could go a long way in containing the rising insurgency before it reaches Boko Haram proportions. While foreign actors could offer logistical help, the Mozambican government should offer much more than that and deal with its culpability in alienating some of its citizens, a situation that provides easy fodder for terrorist recruitment.

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