

# The “Faceless Evildoers” of Cabo Delgado: an Islamist Insurgency in Mozambique?

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Escalation of violence



Twenty-five years after the conclusion of the brutal Mozambican Civil War (1975-92), the insurgent group known as Ahlus Sunna wal Jamaa (local script; acronym: ASWJ) is causing havoc in one of FRELIMO's strongholds—the province of Cabo Delgado.

ASWJ, colloquially referred to as *al-shabaab* ('the youths'), staged its first attack against three police stations in the port-city of Mocimboa da Praia in October 2017. Attacking the town again in April 2020, this time ASWJ's leader, Bwana Omar a.k.a 'Cheia' ('Flood'), announced that the group – which reportedly pledged allegiance to the Islamic State – had come to remain

and establish a sharia-based administration. He accused FRELIMO and the government of being corrupt and individualistic, uninterested in the fate of poor people, but eager to enrich its big men.

## A Fragmented Landscape

Before staging the military attack in October 2017, evidence that a network of young Salafi preachers and students referred to as *al-xababi* (al-shabaab) were gaining momentum in Cabo Delgado surfaced in local and national news. These 'youths' are the youngest generation of Cabo Delgado Salafists groomed under the leadership of Ahlus Sunna, a Cabo Delgado-based faction of CISLAMO, an organization established in 1981 by Mozambican Wahhabis that today is close to the government and that has almost the monopoly over funding coming from Islamic charities. Ahlus Sunna and CISLAMO were able to sponsor the education of many in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Sudan and Egypt thanks to connections to Islamic NGOs and support agencies.

Between 2015 and 2016, Salafi followers in Mocimboa da Praia and the districts of Macomia and Ancuabe started to withdraw their children from public schools, deemed as *kafir* (infidel), change their clothing and public behaviour according to the dictates of Salafi and Wahhabi teachers, and in staunch opposition not only to the Sufi orders that for a long time have controlled Islamic constituencies in Cabo Delgado, but also to the Maputo-based Salafi CISLAMO. Clashes with local religious authorities multiplied and the group gathered in a makeshift mosque, the *Masjid Mussa* in Mocimboa da Praia. In November 2015 shops selling alcohol in the village of Pangane were destroyed by *al-shabaab* and a short-lived clash ensued,[1] while in June 2016 a mosque in the village of Intutupué was stormed by the Salafi youths, who threatened the local CISLAMO scholars, calling them *kafir* and defending principles based on the most literalist interpretation of the Salafi doctrine: not attending public lay schools; not working for the government; refusing to possess ID documents and disavowing the national flag; rejecting state justice in favour of Islamic courts; *hudud* punishment for adulterers and thieves. Shortly thereafter, in October 2016—as the situation

grew increasingly tense and while both the provincial and national administrations provided no response—the local community in Cogolo, a village in Macomia, destroyed a local *al-shabaab* mosque.[2]

## Breaking the Social Contract

According to research-based analyses conducted by the Maputo-based Instituto de Estudos Sociais e Economicos (IESE), sponsors and members of *al-shabaab* are part of a trans-local community whose business is mostly centred on trans-border trade with Tanzania, Zanzibar and the Comoros. They are large- and small-scale businesspeople in the local informal trading sector dealing in: sailboats, motorboats, money transfers, gemstone trading, small-scale money lending. Mocimboa da Praia and Pemba, like the whole borderland of the Cabo Delgado province, are at the core of a network of different commercial routes, where different types of goods (included smuggled wildlife) as well as migrants, are traded. The area is also a long-established corridor for the transit of illegal drugs (heroin, cocaine, etc.) between southern Africa [South Africa?] and the eastern coastal regions. Despite being a FRELIMO stronghold, the province suffers neglect from Maputo: a lack of investments in education and disengagement from establishing, or supporting, viable economic activities have made the area a fringe region that lives on transnational exchanges and informality. Any voices of protest or dissent are labelled as ‘RENAMO voices’ by the government whose main aim for the region is to develop lucrative deals for the exploitation of natural gas and gems.

The activism of the Salafi-jihadi actors in Cabo Delgado seems also to relate to the recent discovery of liquid natural gas reserves in the offshore waters north of Mozambique (between 150 and 180 trillion cubic feet are estimated, the third largest gas reserves in Africa). ASWJ leveraged on dynamics of economic marginalization and social exclusion in one of the less developed regions of the country. Local communities feel they are excluded from the potential benefits resulting from the exploitation of those

huge gas deposits, and are in fact often targeted with forced land seizures or deprived of their traditional livelihoods, such as fishing or subsistence farming.

## Resources, Labour and Exploitation

*Al-shabaab* members in Cabo Delgado, as well as in neighbouring Tanzania and Congo (DRC), are reported to do business in the informal logging of timber, poached wildlife and, increasingly, rubies. Small-scale artisanal mining has long been established in the area of Montepuez, also attracting Somali businessmen who moved in, married and acquired access to mines; but after the allocation of mines to the Montepuez Ruby Mining (MRM) company, the government started an offensive, sending in the army to prevent artisanal mining and chasing away informal miners (*garimpeiros*). The MRM is a mining company majority-owned by the UK-based Gemfields that acquired the exploitation rights from the Mozambican Mwriti Limitada: the forced removal of *garimpeiros* from the site by armed forces resulted in murders, detentions and sexual abuses, for which the MRM was obliged to compensate the victims by a British court. This created a tense relationship with locals: incidents, assaults, clashes and murders are still ongoing between MRM employees and local users.

Businessmen with opaque activities and many interests in the informal exploitation of Cabo Delgado's resources are often reported by President Nyusi to be fostering the insurgency, while the Chief of Police, Bernardino Rafael, claims that the insurgency is carried out on the military-level by Congolese trainers and *amir*. An often-cited liaison person is the Tanzanian businessman known as Chief Hassan, who is referred to as having fighting experience in Somalia with al-Shabaab, while rumours reported to one of the authors of the present essay seem to suggest that the Congolese leaders in the *shura* (council) have been driven in Cabo Delgado by interests in the informal trade network and an ideological split with the leadership of the trans-national Ugandan-Congolese Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) which is mostly active in North Kivu and Ituri.

# The ‘Faceless Evil-doers’

Between October 2017 and October 2019, the death toll of the jihadi insurgents in Cabo Delgado was 400 civilian fatalities. In 2020, an escalation of violence in the region has led to a 300% increase in the number of victims of violent events, if compared to the same period of the previous year (January-April). The government's response has been heavy-handed and aimed at imposing the presence of the state using military force, while at the same time getting closer to the Maputo-based Salafi leadership of CISLAMMO and the territorially strong Cabo Delgado Sufi orders. Following the well-tested pattern of the War on Terror doctrine, Nyusi's government has labelled the group ‘faceless evil-doers’, thus portraying them as de-humanized and morally unacceptable villains. For this reason – apart from several rumours implying that the Zimbabwean Defence Forces have been invited to pursue the insurgents – Nyusi has sent in the infamous Russian private mercenary company, Wagner Group, only to see them flee, and then the Dyck Advisory Group (DAG), the mercenary firm set up by former Rhodesian Army Major Lionel Dyck, famous for quashing the Entumbane uprising on behalf of Robert Mugabe, barely one year after the end of the country's liberation struggle, and for supporting FRELIMO during the civil war. Meanwhile the Mozambican Army (FADM) is increasingly targeting journalists reporting from Cabo Delgado, civilians fleeing to Pemba from the inner province and Muslim northerners, using stop-and-frisk tactics.

The violent response from national security forces – including abuses perpetrated on civilian populations and widespread human rights violations – risks fuelling local grievances against the state and feeding the insurgency through the support earned from communities affected by state-sponsored violence. Any external intervention in the country – a SADC-led military operation in the region seems to be likely – should take into account the complexity of a security crisis that has its roots in a social and economic dimension, and which is having an impact primarily on civilian communities.

## References

[1] Testimony of Dr Paolo Israel, mail exchange, July 2020.

[2] Nacedje Community Radio and Television of Macomia. 2016a. Populares da aldeia Cogolo em Mucojo, destruíram há dias uma mesquita local, supostamente os seguidores na sua maioria jovens não seguem raízes da religião islâmica antiga. Available here

Autore:

Camillo Casola

ISPI

Alessio Iocchi

Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI)

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