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Mozambique: Islamist insurgency – In-depth analysis of Ahl al- Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah (ASWJ)

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July 2020



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July 2020 (revised title: September 2020)

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Executive summary

Political, economic, religious and social triggers have left Mozambique exposed to acts of violence carried out by Islamic groups such as *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamma'ah* (ASWJ). Cabo Delgado, the northernmost province of Mozambique, borders Tanzania and has been engulfed by attacks from violent Islamic militants since 2017. In the span of just three years, over 350 attacks have taken place, caused over 1,000 deaths and forced over 100,000 residents of Cabo Delgado into displacement. The government of Mozambique has tried to counter this insurgency, however it is clear that international support is required and that the government needs to re-strategize its approach to key social problems in order to quell some of the root causes of the insurgency.

Cabo Delgado is the most neglected part of Mozambique and has the highest rates of illiteracy, inequality and child malnutrition in the country. Most of Cabo Delgado has poor economic and social conditions – the poorest health facilities; the poorest schools; the poorest sanitation; high unemployment, especially among the youth. This is the case even though the province is one of the richest in natural resources. This combination of factors has created a catalyst for the upsurge of violence and the prevalence of Islamist insurgency.

ASWJ is still evolving in its ideology, recruitment and attack methodology. The insurgency group's followers initially gained their ideology from radical Islamic preachers in Kenya and Tanzania. In June 2019, the group began to show an open affiliation to the Islamic State group (IS). Although the insurgency did not initially arise as a movement targeting Christians, their involvement with IS has brought a new dimension. Recent attacks have shown a trend of Christians being increasingly targeted. Christians in Cabo Delgado Province have faced the effects of the insurgency directly through targeted killings, the looting of churches, homes and businesses and even the destruction of church buildings. Coinciding with the affiliation to IS (and its growing influence), ASWJ's attacks have been increasing in frequency, severity, intensity and coordination. In the first quarter of 2020 alone, there have been over 50 reported deaths at the hands of the insurgents.

If an effective response to these attacks is not developed soon, there is a risk that the insurgency will escalate into a nationwide problem which could then grow into becoming a regional problem. This would cause great fear in the Christian community, not to mention loss of life and damage to properties and church buildings. Such a scenario would end with the work of the Church in Mozambique being brought to halt. Churches, missions and other non-governmental

organizations have played a central role in the provision of education, health clinics and other basic services in the region. Thus, hindrance to the work of the Church in Mozambique will seriously affect the level of development. It is the very marginalization and lack of development in Cabo Delgado which has been one of the main catalysts used by the insurgents to gain legitimacy in the first place.

Open Doors is fully aware that the conflict does not revolve around religion alone; it has a socio-economic and political background as well. Thus, Open Doors would also want to emphasize the fact that ASWJ emerged due to the socio-economic problems of the region and the marginalization of the local community. However, the role of religion in the conflict should not be overlooked. The group has conducted attacks that are consistent with what jihadists in other regions have been doing. It has the backing of an international jihadist group. The Islamic State group (IS) has even claimed responsibility for some of the attacks. Some of the videos taken by the group have been incorporated in IS propaganda videos.¹ The evidence is clear. It is within this context that IS warned South Africa about its alleged planned involvement in the conflict of Mozambique. Thus, it is essential that the government of Mozambique, the international community and religious leaders in the country approach the issue holistically.

1. Introduction

The most recent insurgency in Mozambique erupted in October 2017; responsible for the outbreak of violence has been a local jihadist group referred to as *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamma'ah* (ASWJ) which translates as 'Followers of the prophetic tradition' and are known locally simply as *al-Shabaab*. It should be noted however that reference to *al-Shabaab* is not connected to the militant group of that name in Somalia. ASWJ was initially formed as a religious sect in 2007 and, since 2017, it has evolved into a violent insurgency group. The attacks on 5 and 6 October 2017, left 17 people dead and targeted police and military bases in Macimboa de Praia, in Cabo Delgado, a province in the northern part of Mozambique. The attacks followed the arrest of conservative religious leaders in Mocimboa da Praia for allegedly inciting civil disobedience.²

According to a report by Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) updated in April 2020, since the initial attack in October 2017 there have been at least 350 more attacks with a main focus on Cabo Delgado Province.³ Since mid-May 2018, the level of violence has been particularly high; there have been approximately 1,000 incidents in all (including killings, kidnapping of civilians, looting and burning down of entire villages) which has caused the displacement of over 115,000 people.⁴

¹ BBC News, Mozambique: Is Cabo Delgado the latest Islamic State outpost?, [15/5/2020]
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-52532741>

² Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Mozambique Update, [19/4/2020]
<https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/>

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid; Relief Web – Assessment Capacities Project, Mozambique: Deteriorating humanitarian situation in Cabo Delgado province, Short note – 08 April 2020, [19/4/2020], <https://reliefweb.int/organization/acaps>

A recent major attack with over 50 fatalities occurred in the village of Xitaxi in Muidumbe district, Cabo Delgado Province on 7 April 2020.⁵ The insurgents indiscriminately shot dead 52 youths in the village where they were attempting to recruit youth to join their ranks. The militants encountered resistance and they reacted by murdering those who refused to join.⁶ This attack took place at the same time as several other attacks in two other districts in Cabo Delgado – Mocimboa da Praia and Quissanga.⁷ Six chapels and a 100-year-old church in Cabo Delgado – the Catholic mission of the Sacred Heart of Jesus situated in Nangololo – were attacked, initiating a new wave of Christians being targeted.

This paper provides an analysis of the militant group *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamma'ah* (ASWJ) - its affiliation, its ties to other jihadist groups, its attacks and their effect on Christians. It will also examine the Mozambican government's response to this insurgency.

2. Background

Mozambique is rich in natural resources, a biologically and culturally diverse nation with a population of over 31 million,⁸ with more than half of that population living and working in rural areas. It is a country endowed with abundant arable land, water, energy, as well as mineral resources and the recently discovered natural gas in Cabo Delgado in the northern part of the country. The nation is strategically located with a stretch of over 2,500km of the Indian Ocean coastline. The nation borders Tanzania, South Africa, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and eSwatini. The last four countries listed above are landlocked and hence dependent on Mozambique for import and export trade and accessing global markets.⁹

Despite the abundance in natural resources, Mozambique remains one of the poorest nations in the world; it is listed among the 10 poorest nations in the Human Development Report published by United Nations Development Program in 2019, having a Human Development Index ranking of 180 out of 189 countries.¹⁰

2.1 The insurgency's political, economic, religious and social triggers

There are many factors which make a country vulnerable and predisposed to conflict. Mozambique has political, economic, religious and social triggers which have inevitably left the

⁵ DW, Dozens killed in Mozambique for refusing to join terrorists, [20/4/2020] <https://www.dw.com/en/dozens-killed-in-mozambique-for-refusing-to-join-terrorists/a-53211140>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Aid to the Church in Need, MOZAMBIQUE: Bishop speaks out following attacks blamed on ISIS, [19/4/2020], <https://acnuk.org/news/mozambique-bishop-speaks-out-following-attacks-blamed-on-isis/>

⁸ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Dynamics, World Population Prospects 2019, [20/4/2020], <https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>

⁹ World Bank Mozambique Overview [20/4/2020], <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/mozambique/overview>

¹⁰ United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 2019 Human Development Report, [20/4/2020], <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>

country exposed to acts of violence by militant groups such as ASWJ. The country, mired in poverty and corruption, has an unstable political environment. The country also has a history of civil war, which has flared up again through the breakdown in 2013 of the longstanding peace-deal between the government ruling party “*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*” (FRELIMO) and the opposition, “*Resistência Nacional Moçambicana*” (RENAMO). Fighting erupted in 2014 as a result of disputed election results and again in 2019 when FRELIMO remained in power.¹¹

Mozambique gained independence from Portugal in 1975, following 10 years of guerrilla warfare (from 1964 to 1974).¹² The Mozambique Liberation Front, FRELIMO, led the struggle for independence and has been the ruling party ever since. In the 45 years of self-rule, the nation has experienced both one of the bloodiest civil wars in modern history and drastic political and economic changes which have transformed the country from being a socialist one-party state into a neo-liberal democracy.

The 15-year civil war (May 1977 - October 1992) erupted just two years after Mozambique officially gained independence from Portugal. It was fought between the main political party FRELIMO and the opposition group RENAMO, who opposed FRELIMO’s Marxist policies. The civil war took the lives of over one million people, out of a population of just fourteen million at the time.¹³ To date, tensions remain between the two political parties.

Cabo Delgado, where 99% of the attacks by ASWJ have taken place, has long been the most neglected part of Mozambique. It suffered greatly in the war of independence and the subsequent civil war and has the country’s highest rates of illiteracy, inequality and child malnutrition.¹⁴ Cabo Delgado has a Muslim majority of 52% - one of the few provinces in Mozambique with a Muslim majority – with a moderate Sufi tradition as its foundation. It is also important to note that the Muslim Mwami ethnic group also feels marginalized by the predominantly animist Makonde in that region.

Most of Cabo Delgado has poor economic and social conditions – the poorest health facilities, the poorest schools, the poorest sanitation and high unemployment – especially among the youth. The province often ranks at the bottom of global social and economic indicators. This is the case despite the fact that this province is one of the richest in natural resources. However, it has little to show but illiteracy, poverty and now an upsurge in violence.

In the aftermath of the civil war, heroin trafficking flourished in Cabo Delgado; and in the past 10 to 15 years, many other illicit markets – including timber, ivory, rubies and other gemstones, drugs

¹¹ AllAfrica, Mozambique: Renamo Kills Mozambican Soldiers in Zambezia, [20/4/2020], <https://allafrica.com/stories/201405170059.html>

¹² Vol 1 Mozambique Foreign Policy and Government Guide: Strategic Information and Developments, p.24 [2007]

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ USAID, Building Community Resilience in Cabo Delgado, [Feb 2020]

and human smuggling – have boomed in the region.¹⁵ Many of these trades traverse Cabo Delgado en route to Pemba port, where the authorities are known to be corrupt.

Many of the 16 districts of Cabo Delgado Province have been key areas for illegal trade carried out by various parties, including ASWJ militants.¹⁶ Mocímboa da Praia has long been a major hub for illicit trafficking, with the fishing harbor used for landing heroin off dhows from the Makran Coast, as well as illegal migrants, ivory and timber all smuggled in and out by boat. Macomia has been a center for the timber trade, in which corruption has played a major role for more than 20 years. Montepuez is the site of the biggest ruby deposits in the world. These were discovered in 2009 and local elites now have full control of access to concessions and have forcibly displaced farmers and traditional ruby miners. Balama has been an important center for ivory poaching and trafficking since about 2011, and more recently a small market for gemstones and alluvial gold has developed. The northern Mozambique coast is also a major site for human smuggling on the migrant route from the Horn of Africa to South Africa.

In addition to political instability, the discovery of vast natural gas reserves in northern Mozambique in 2011 has added to the sense of relative deprivation among the population of Cabo Delgado and mostly young adherents of the ASWJ insurgency group. At first, the discovery of natural gas had many believing that jobs and public infrastructure investments would soon flow into the impoverished province. Instead, the gas projects have created few jobs and produced mostly displacement and disappointment for local residents. According to a 2016 report by the exploration company Anadarko, over 550 families needed to be physically relocated; 952 families would lose access to their farmland and over 3,000 individuals would lose access to fishing grounds to make way for the gas facilities and its operation.¹⁷

The country is also still facing the after-effects of two of the strongest cyclones ever to hit the African continent: Cyclone Idai (March 2019) and Cyclone Kenneth (April 2019) killed hundreds of people, leaving 1.85 million people stranded with no homes, food, water or basic infrastructure.¹⁸ Farmland, livestock and fisheries were destroyed which has further compounded the economic difficulties in the region and tension within communities.

Thus, the underlying political, economic, religious and social factors causing poverty, high levels of unemployment, very high illiteracy levels, corruption, illegal trade, political instability, religious and ethnic tensions, unequal distribution of resources and natural disasters have all left Cabo Delgado prone to insurgency.

¹⁵ The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, *Where Crime Compounds Conflict: Understanding Northern Mozambique's vulnerabilities*, p.4 [Oct 2018]

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Anadarko, *Mozambique Gas Development: Resettlement Plan*, [25/4/2020]
http://www.mzlng.com/content/documents/RP_Vol_1_Eng.pdf

¹⁸ United Nations Environment Programme, *Lessons in the aftermath of Cyclones Idai and Kenneth in Mozambique*, [5/4/2020], <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/lessons-aftermath-cyclones-idai-and-kenneth-mozambique>

3. Ideology

3.1 The emergence of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamma'ah* (ASWJ)

ASWJ first appeared in the northern part of Cabo Delgado Province as a religious group and then started to adopt military cells towards the end of 2015. The group follows an interpretation of radical Islam and understands its adherents to be “*followers of the prophetic tradition and community*”, as the group’s name can be translated. From the group’s perspective, the Islamic communities in Cabo Delgado were not following the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad closely enough. They took on the name *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamma'ah* in order to set themselves apart from the local communities, who they considered to be practicing an inferior version of Islam.¹⁹

Although the group seems to have gained hundreds of followers through its campaign of violence from 2017 onwards, many key factors remain a mystery. Much speculation remains concerning the motivation behind the group, the number of adherents, its leadership and organization structure. Even the name of the group itself has not been consistently used – for some members, the group is referred to as *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamma'ah*, while others prefer to use the Arabic term for ‘youth’, al-Shabaab, (not intending any reference to the Somali Islamist network of the same name). The group has also been referred to as *Ahlu al-Sunna*, *Ansar al-Sunna* or *Swahili Sunna*.

3.2 Size of the group

Available information remains limited, but a study by two academics and a local imam estimate the group size to be between 200 and 1500 fighters. The group has ideological links to other Islamic militants such as al-Shabaab in Somalia/Kenya, but as of yet there is no clear military co-operation them.

3.3 Identification markers

To differentiate themselves from other adherents of Islam at the local level, the Islamic insurgents practice ordinary Islamic customs in a very distinctive manner. They disapprove of the way that other Muslims profess their faith and reject celebrating marriages and other ceremonies. When someone dies, they claim that the head of the deceased should not be covered as is custom and that the body should be buried right away. They even refute the reciting of funeral prayers. The group also have their own dress code: They wear a white turban, shave their hair, grow a large beard and wear a black coat with trousers reaching just below the knee. That is a custom which is not generally accepted in other forms of Islam practiced in Mozambique.²⁰ They even reject the

¹⁹ Institute for Social and Economic Studies (IESE), *Islamic Radicalization in Northern Mozambique. The Case of Mocímboa da Praia*, p.10 [2019]

²⁰ Habibe S, Salvador F and Pereira J, *Radicalização Islâmica no norte de Moçambique: O caso da Mocímboa da Praia*, [21/4/2020],

mosques in Cabo Delgado, refuse to participate in the communal mosque prayers and insist on carrying out their own group prayers.

The group also differentiates itself from the local population by not allowing their children to attend formal schools; they arm themselves with bladed weapons to symbolize Jihad and allegedly enter mosques wearing shoes, a practice forbidden by Islam. Additionally, they do not accept dialogue with local administrative structures or with local religious leaders.²¹

Islamic clerics interviewed by the Institute for Security Studies spoke of rising tensions in society. Where the group is influential there have been disputes and family breakdown involving fathers, sons, nephews and uncles, which has thrown the Muslim community into unprecedented chaos. Community leaders have held several meetings to discourage the native youth from submitting to ideologies that contradict the long upheld Islamic way of life of the community. Many of the youth refused to attend these meetings and continued to defy the established Islamic orthodoxy in town. This resulted in their being regarded as a bad influence on ordinary Muslims in the area and led to their expulsion from their neighborhoods.²²

3.4 Motivation and recruitment

Members of the ASWJ are typically between 20 and 35 years old and come from the Mocimboa da Praia, and nearby districts of Palma, Nangade and Macomia. They have no employment due to their low level of education. In fact, it has been documented that only 0.3% of Cabo Delgado's population has post-secondary education, the lowest percentage in the country and the province has the highest rate of young people between the ages of five and twenty-five who have not attended school.²³

The motivation for individuals to join the group has been influenced by the poor economic situation in Cabo Delgado as discussed above. Studies conducted by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) have found that 70% of individuals who join terrorist groups in Africa do so because of violent and repressive actions taken by the government.²⁴ Other factors making youth vulnerable to insurgency recruitment can include the individual's geographic proximity to a terrorist group, economic vulnerability, perceptions of social or political marginalization, exposure to permissive social networks, and exposure to extremist propaganda.

<http://www.open.ac.uk/technology/mozambique/sites/www.open.ac.uk.technology.mozambique/files/files/Moc%CC%81mboa%20da%20Praia.pdf>

²¹ Ibid

²² Matsinhe D M and Estacio Valoi E: The Genesis of Insurgency in Northern Mozambique, 27 Southern Africa Report, Institute for Security Studies, 2019, p.9

²³ USAID, Equip2 Case study: Using Opportunity to Learn and Early Grade Reading Fluency to Measure School Effectiveness in Mozambique (undated), available at: <https://www.epdc.org/sites/default/files/documents/OTL%20Mozambique.pdf>, accessed 9 July 2020

²⁴ UNDP - Regional Bureau for Africa, Journey to extremism in Africa : drivers, incentives and the tipping point for recruitment, [New York : UNDP, 2017], p.75.

However, the relative importance of these factors varies individually and according to the local context.

3.5 Structure and operation

ASWJ's structure is based on cells, managed by group religious leaders.²⁵ The cells are relatively autonomous and with flexible chains of command. The organization is split into as many as 20 cells having 20 male members each, with units, divisions and various power structures. The autonomy of the cells means that each leader can draw up and follow his own strategy and manage the areas for which his cell is responsible without any coordination with other cells. This means that the capture or death of a leader does not significantly affect the group's operability.

The constellation of corruption, dispossession and unfair distribution of resources in the economy of north Mozambique provides a foothold for grievances and is a breeding ground for the recruitment of insurgents. Discontented youth with little education and no future prospects are often keen to join a militant cause, as has been the case for Boko Haram in Nigeria too.

ASWJ uses two main methods of recruitment, one direct and the other, indirect. The former involves direct contact through a potential recruits' family, group of friends or through local mosques. The latter method involves the use of multimedia – e.g. social media, business networks and audio or video messages from radical movements or teachers such as Aboud Rogo. The group preys on socially marginalized youth with poor education and no formal employment. ASWJ leaders frequent local mosques and encourage youth to leave government schools and accept scholarships to attend madrassas in countries like Sudan and Saudi Arabia where they are radicalized. The majority of these youth are of Mwani ethnicity, who are majority Muslim.²⁶ Other persons targeted are traders at informal markets; young immigrants from countries like Tanzania, Somalia and the Great Lakes region, who come to Cabo Delgado in search of better opportunities; and religious leaders, mostly young people who trained abroad and who are unwelcome in the local mosques.²⁷

Reports have revealed how young men have been offered money, direct employment or bursaries in exchange for joining the movement. They are given money to travel to neighboring countries either to take up these offers or to undergo jihadist training.²⁸ Civil-society members in Palma have described how the early leaders of the insurgency first began to recruit young people: Rather than immediately build up an armed movement, young people were first encouraged to join their favored mosques and madrassas through the offer of business loans. These loans could be invested in any sector of their interest and all new adherents to the sect moved into business. Some of them bought new boats for fishing, some opened small shops selling food and consumer

²⁵ Habibe S , Salvador F and Pereira J: Radicalização Islâmica no norte de Moçambique: O caso da Mocímboa da Praia, Supra Note 19

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

goods, and others established themselves as car-repair men or vendors of building materials or electrical tools.

The emergence of violent Islamic militancy in Mozambique, however, is not just a reaction to poverty, inequality and frustration over continued government neglect. The rise of radical Islam is also in part due to the regional phenomenon of Salafist ideology expanding across borders. It is supported by benefactors in the Gulf states through the funding of mosques, madrassas, education institutions, humanitarian and social programs, and through financing young students to receive education abroad, all with the threefold aim of propagating a conservative version of Islam, replacing government institutions with Sharia-based structures and imposing Sharia law to create an Islamic state.²⁹

3.6 Doctrine and ideology

ASWJ does not have its own elaborate doctrine; it does, however, advocate the recovery of traditional Islamic values and the implementation of Sharia. In the group's eyes, the Islam currently practiced in Mozambique's mosques is a degenerate form of Islam. The group envisages the prevention of formal education which has been watered down with Western values and they want women to dress in more modest clothing.³⁰

ASWJ bases its ideology on the teaching of radical Islamic preachers from the East African nations of Kenya and Tanzania, the latter being a country directly bordering the province of Cabo Delgado where a majority of the insurgent group's attacks have taken place. ASWJ is reported to have been formed by followers of the Kenyan radical Islamic cleric and al-Shabaab sympathizer, Aboud Rogo Mohammed, who masterminded the 1998 US Embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam.³¹ In his lifetime, Aboud Rogo Mohammed was known to denigrate non-Muslims, criticize moderate Muslims and instruct his followers to abstain from politics, elections and inter-religious dialogue.³² He was closely associated with militant groups such as *al-Hijra* (al-Shabaab's affiliate in Kenya) and conservative Islamic schools. His ideology has outlived him and his teachings are widely used by groups such as ASWJ.

After the death of their ideological leader, Aboud Rogo Mohammed, adherents of ASWJ first settled in the Kibiti District of Tanzania before entering Mozambique.³³ In Kibiti, the group created drug smuggling networks to fund fighters and the purchase of ammunition to fuel their insurgency. In 2017, the group moved their operational base across the border into Cabo Delgado

²⁹ Pirio G, Pittelli R, and Adam Y, The Emergence of Violent Extremism in Northern Mozambique, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, [1/5/2020] <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/the-emergence-of-violent-extremism-in-northern-mozambique/>

³⁰ Morier-Genoud E, Mozambique's own version of Boko Haram is tightening its deadly grip, [25/4/2020] <https://qz.com/africa/1307554/mozambiques-boko-haram-al-sunnah-is-tightening-its-deadly-grip/>

³¹ Sunguta West, Ansar al-Sunna: A New Militant Islamist Group Emerges in Mozambique, Terrorism Monitor, [Vol 16, 2018]

³² 32 Abdisaid M. Ali, Islamist Extremism in East Africa, African Security Brief, p.4 [2016]

³³ Ibid

Province of Mozambique after a crackdown by the Tanzanian authorities which killed 13 of their number in August 2017.³⁴ Cabo Delgado, having a majority Muslim population, high levels of youth unemployment and marginal economic development, provided a suitable environment for the militant group to grow its membership.

ASWJ has not been in a hurry to claim responsibility for its attacks. Earlier in 2020, a video was released claiming responsibility for two attacks on towns in northern Mozambique, which was the group's first official communication in over two years of activity in the gas-rich area. The video was produced by Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP), which regards ASWJ as one of its branches. In this widely circulated video on WhatsApp in Mozambique, a militant leader offered an explanation for the group's actions, ending widespread speculation about the group's intentions. In the video a tall, unmasked man in khaki uniform surrounded by other fighters is seen making such statements as: "We are not fighting for wealth, we only want Islamic law"³⁵ and "We occupy [the towns] to show that the government of the day is unfair. It humiliates the poor and gives the profit to the bosses."³⁶ The man spoke frequently about Islam, and his desire for an "Islamic government, not a government of unbelievers", he also cited alleged abuses by Mozambique's government troops and repeatedly complained that the government was "unfair".³⁷

It is clear to observers that ASWJ is still evolving. Over time, its leadership structure, operations and affiliations will become more apparent.

4. Operations and major attacks

4.1 Ground zero – the first attack and beyond

The first attack attributed to ASWJ took place in Mocimbo de Praia, a port town in the northern part of Cabo Delgado Province on 5 October 2017. A group of 30 to 40 militants attacked three police stations including the district command post and began a siege which lasted 48 hours.³⁸ Two police officers were killed in the attack along with fourteen militants. Five policemen were injured and two of the attackers were captured. There were also reports of civilians being killed but there were no confirmed details. This attack was a turning-point for ASWJ, marking the shift from being a religious sect to an armed insurgency group.

³⁴ United States Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism 2017 - Tanzania, 19 September 2018, [accessed 23 April 2020], available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5bcf1f7cc.html>.

³⁵ News24, Jihadist group claims northern Mozambique attacks, [26/4/2020]

<https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/jihadist-group-claims-northern-mozambique-attacks-20200326>

³⁶ BBC, Is Cabo Delgado the latest Islamic State outpost?, [25/4/2020] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52532741>

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Mozambique Update, Supra Note 1

While it was based in Tanzania's Kibiti district, attacks by the group were less frequent than those currently occurring in Mozambique and were primarily focused on stealing weapons from the police for arming fighters.³⁹ In Tanzania, ASWJ militants operated in coordinated teams of 10 to 30 fighters and used motorcycles. Armed with assault rifles, these teams would ambush lone police vehicles on roads and small police check-points during the day or night.⁴⁰ These attacks were largely successful until the Tanzanian government began a crackdown and killed 13 fighters in August 2017, after an attack on a police check-point had led to the death of two police officers.

Since 2017, ASWJ has been based in Cabo Delgado Province and has mainly conducted indiscriminate attacks against civilians with the death toll increasing annually. Statistics show approximately 19 civilian deaths in 2017; 180 in 2018; 589 in 2019 and 249 deaths so far in 2020.⁴¹

4.2 How ASWJ has evolved

ASWJ's armed groups have been randomly targeting local villages and terrorizing the local population in Cabo Delgado. Until mid-2019, attacks were often conducted with machetes instead of assault rifles since most villagers lacked firearms to use against the militants. The group now makes use of automatic weapons. Civilians who have managed to survive and flee speak of the militants killing men, women and children, maiming, torturing, burning homes and destroying crops and shops. There are also reports of beheadings, kidnappings, extortion and disappearances of women and children.⁴² The attackers sometimes warn the local population where and when they will strike, creating panic as people rush to flee their villages, leaving everything behind.

Since 2017, hundreds of villages in Mozambique have been burned down or are now completely abandoned; ASWJ militants have been carrying out a wide and indiscriminate campaign of terror causing immense loss of property, crops and farmland. In February 2020, violence intensified with the group attacking five communities in Quissanga district in the villages of Nraha, Mussomero, Namidai, Namiruma and Mahate. The raiders burnt down homes and the Mahate health center, beheading seven of their victims.⁴³ Government institutions have also been targeted.

The year 2020 has seen a dramatic increase in the number of brutal attacks by ASWJ insurgents in Cabo Delgado, with attacks in the period February - April 2020 being the most violent since October 2017. In total, at least 80 attacks have carried out in Cabo Delgado Province since the beginning of 2020.⁴⁴ Not all attacks however resulted in casualties. So far, the conflict has killed

³⁹ Assayerisk, *Al Sunnah wa Jama'ah (ASWJ) terrorism threat for Mozambique and Tanzania*, [29 August 2018], p.3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p.4

⁴¹ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), *Mozambique Update*, *Supra Note 1*

⁴² *Ibid*

⁴³ All Africa, *Five more villages attacked in Cabo Delgado*, [27/4/2020], <https://allafrica.com/stories/202002050720.html>

⁴⁴ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), *Mozambique Update*, *Supra note 1*

more than 1,000 people and forced more than 100,000 people to flee their homes.⁴⁵ The young Islamic militants do not merely burn villages and behead people, they also capture whole towns, albeit temporarily. They stay long enough to slaughter any government forces and then retreat to the bush.

Civilians have fled in all directions, including to small islands, where many have nowhere to stay. Some, among them many children and women, have had to sleep in the open air and have limited access to clean water. The majority of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) have taken refuge with families or friends adding pressure to already meagre local resources in the poverty-stricken country. Many IDPs are living in very poor conditions, lack the most basic resources and are prone to disease.

In its shift from religious sect to insurgency, ASJW resembles Boko Haram, argues Eric Morier-Genoud of Queen's University Belfast.⁴⁶ After the initial attacks of 2017, the religious motivation of the militants was not clear to observers. The attacks were also infrequent and only partially successful. This changed by the beginning of 2020, with the most audacious attack occurring at the end of March. On 23 March 2020, the insurgents attacked and captured Mocimboa da Praia before being repulsed by security forces the following day.⁴⁷ This Spring offensive began to reveal the religious motivation behind the attacks more clearly, especially since ASJW now had the support of IS, as claimed in videos uploaded to the internet.

Having temporarily seized the town of Mocimboa da Praia on 23 March 2020, ASJW militants then went on to conduct a similar attack on nearby Quissanga, the district capital. Following this, the insurgent group filmed a video where they called for Sharia law.⁴⁸ The group has launched several attacks since then, including two in the Muidumbe district on 6 and 7 April 2020. The frequency and sophistication of the attacks shows that ASWJ is growing in strength and capacity in the province. Recruitment is an ongoing process: As already mentioned above, in April 2020, ASWJ militants killed 52 people in Mozambique's northernmost Cabo Delgado region in an attack claiming the highest number of victims in a single attack since October 2017.⁴⁹ This attack was an act of retribution after a group of youths had refused to be recruited by the insurgents.

The group's funding originates primarily from three sources: Illicit activities, donations from local Mozambicans and finance from international benefactors. Illicit activities involve the importation and smuggling of drugs to other parts of Africa; there is also an international network of illegal

⁴⁵ Fresh violence in northern Mozambique forces thousands to flee, Andrej Mahecic UNHCR Spokesperson speaking in a UNHCR briefing in February 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2020/2/5e3d2d8f4/fresh-violence-northern-mozambique-forces-thousands-flee.html>

⁴⁶ Eric Morier-Genoud, Mozambique's own version of Boko Haram is tightening its deadly grip, *Supra* note 28.

⁴⁷ Asharq Al-Awsat, ISIS claims attack that killed dozens in Mozambique, [26/4/2020], <https://english.aawsat.com//home/article/2198206/isis-claims-attack-killed-dozens-mozambique>

⁴⁸ ISS Africa, ISS: Insurgents change tactics as Mozambique seeks help, [21/4/2020] <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/security/civil-security/iss-insurgents-change-tactics-as-mozambique-seeks-help/>

⁴⁹ DW, Dozens killed in Mozambique for refusing to join terrorists, *Supra* Note 4

trade in wood, charcoal, ivory and rubies which involves Tanzania and the Great Lakes Region, as well as Chinese and Vietnamese actors.⁵⁰

The typology of attacks by ASWJ has seen a transformation. In Mocímboa da Praia in October 2017, they took over control of the town by targeting three police stations and ambushed a police convoy, killing the head of reconnaissance of the government's Rapid Intervention Force. Following the introduction of counter-insurgency measures by the security forces, the militants responded by introducing more gruesome killing methods such as beheading their victims. They also began to attack villages, loot and burn houses and generally create panic in the region. In May 2018, reports emerged that the militants were now killing women and children.

Since mid-2019, the group has increased both the sophistication of its strategy and the frequency of its attacks. It appears that the group is now better armed and trained than before and has grown in size. While it may have acquired weapons from its operations against the Mozambican armed forces, this shift could also be a result of its affiliation with IS. It hardly needs stating that the government needs to quell this Islamist movement before it becomes a bigger threat than it already is.

5. Regional presence, leadership and affiliates

5.1 Cabo Delgado: The eye of the ASWJ storm

The insurgent group *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamma'ah* has so far focused its attacks in northern Mozambique in Cabo Delgado Province. In the course of three years since the initial attack of October 2017, the group has coordinated and executed attacks in eleven of sixteen districts of the province. Over 350 attacks have taken place spread out over Ancuabe District; Ibo District; Macomia District; Meluco District; Mocímboa da Praia District; Mueda District; Muidumbe District; Nangade District; Palma District; Pemba District and Quissanga District.⁵¹

The emergence of ASWJ is an indication that Islamist influence is spreading in East Africa and in this case in Mozambique, a Christian majority country. As already stated above, it is clear that this group has been at least inspired by the success of al-Shabaab in Somalia and Kenya, since the group is said to have been formed by Aboud Rogo, an Islamic cleric and al-Shabaab sympathizer, who masterminded the Embassy bombings in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi in the late 1990s.

5.2 An Islamic state in Mozambique?

⁵⁰ Habibe S, Salvador F and Pereira J, *Radicalização Islâmica no norte de Moçambique: O caso da Mocímboa da Praia*, Supra note 19

⁵¹ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Mozambique Update, Supra note 1

Until June 2019, ASWJ had no confirmed ties to any other regional or international militant groups. However, in June 2019, IS claimed that it was involved in the attacks in Mozambique operating under the umbrella of Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP).⁵² IS did so through a brief statement in which it claimed to have repelled an army attack on its militants in the northern port district of Mocimboa da Praia, off the Indian Ocean coast.

ASWJ's interests overlap with IS's interests in that both groups seek to impose Sharia law and reject Western education, healthcare and other influences. Additionally, as suggested in their recent video after the March attacks on Mocimbo de Praia and Quissanga, ASWJ have taken on board IS's jihadist outlook by displaying Islamic State flags and purporting to enhance the cause for Sharia law.⁵³ The increasingly global aspects of the insurgency in Mozambique, however, should not overshadow the fact that it is still, at its core, an extremely local phenomenon and must be addressed as such.

5.3 Who leads *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamma'ah*?

ASWJ appears to lack clear, centralized leadership to coordinate the group's ideology and operations. (The lack of coordination has been seen from the way the group conducts its attacks.) This could make it more susceptible to the leadership and guidance of IS. In terms of organizational structure, the group is broken down into cells, which allegedly enjoy relative autonomy. ASWJ has used jihadist videos (similar to those used by other radical movements in Africa) to promote itself and radicalize its following. Its leaders have targeted poor, marginalized and unemployed youth, especially among the Mwani, the smallest ethnic group in Cabo Delgado.

At least since Spring 2020, ASWJ's leadership has been more clearly inspired by international jihadism, upholding goals typical for other Islamist insurgent groups such as the establishment of an Islamic state following Sharia law and the eschewing of the government's secular education system.⁵⁴ Although information is very limited, according to mainstream imams in the districts of Mocimboa da Praia and Montepuez, one of the three most prominent leaders of ASWJ is a Gambian named Musa. The other two are Mozambican, Jafar Alawi and Nuro Adremane. The latter reportedly received a scholarship to train in Somalia, traveling by road through Tanzania and Kenya to reach Somalia, as did a number of other members of the group. The Gambian leader actively sought out recruits in Montepuez District among segments of the population with grievances against both the security forces of an international mining company and the national police.⁵⁵

⁵² ISS Africa, Is Islamic State taking charge of Mozambique's jihadist insurgency, [21/4/2020], <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/is-islamic-state-taking-charge-of-mozambiques-jihadist-insurgency>

⁵³ Chatham House, Why they insurgency in Northern Mozambique has got worse, [29/4/2020] <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/why-insurgency-northern-mozambique-has-got-worse>

⁵⁴ Pirio G, Pittelli R, and Adam Y, The Emergence of Violent Extremism in Northern Mozambique, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Supra note 27

⁵⁵ Ibid

6. Relationship with other jihadist groups

As indicated above, up until roughly mid-2019, ASWJ's attacks appeared to be random and uncoordinated, partly motivated by the looting of property and acts of revenge against village elders and clerics who showed opposition to the group. Male fighters would enter a village first, killing or driving out anyone resisting; female companions would then be sent in to gather up belongings and then finally village buildings would be set alight. The ASWJ cells were not well organized and executed low-tech attacks with machetes and a few handguns.

The methods of attack have since been increasing in sophistication. Where attacks were once carried out with machetes, now fighters have automatic weapons.⁵⁶ ASWJ has also been scaling up its attacks, for instance now seizing government buildings, blocking roads and temporarily hoisting the black-and-white Islamic State flag over towns and villages across the province. These are all indications of enhanced training and of an identifiable link with other jihadist groups.

In May 2018, a small group of people presumed to be members of ASWJ from Mozambique appeared on a Telegram channel with an IS-style flag saying that they would soon swear allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the head of the Islamic State group.⁵⁷ After a group has pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, future operations are carried out in IS's name and propaganda coverage of the group's activities is released by IS centrally. This model has previously been seen in Nigeria (when a Boko Haram faction became part of IS-West Africa Province) and in Egypt (when *Ansar Beit al-Maqdis* became IS-Sinai Province). Such relationships allow IS to expand into new regions, while local forces gain financing and propaganda support from being part of IS - as well as added legitimacy in the eyes of would-be jihadists.

The nature of the attack on 23 March 2019, where the insurgents temporarily seized the town of Mocimbo de Praia, clearly suggests that ASWJ were already drawing closer to IS at that time. Then, in June 2019, IS officially claimed the insurgents as part of its central African franchise – Islamic State Central African Province (ISCAP).⁵⁸ The militants who took control of Mocimboa da Praia carried the black flag of the Islamic State group. Security analysts claim that the nature of the more recent attacks – i.e. the temporary taking control of a town - fits with IS tactics. Analysts claim that IS would seem to be taking advantage of ASWJ's already established presence, using it to rebrand and spread IS presence further afield. Islamic State's sub-Saharan African presence is already known to include a West Africa province amalgamating interests in Nigeria, Mali and Burkina Faso. More recently, IS has now confirmed its presence in Central Africa through affiliated insurgent groups *Madina Tawheed Waljihad* in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and ASWJ in Mozambique.

The presence of IS in Africa - and more specifically in this case in Mozambique - is directly linked to its territorial defeat in Iraq and Syria and the need to establish its importance elsewhere. ISCAP

⁵⁶ The Economist, Mozambique's mysterious conflict is intensifying, [1/5/2020] <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/04/02/mozambiques-mysterious-conflict-is-intensifying>

⁵⁷ The Global Strategy Network, The Islamic State in East Africa, [Hiraal Institute, 31 July 2018], p.44

⁵⁸ Ibid

follows IS's usual strategy of co-opting or rebranding already established militant groups. ISCAP's geographic structure, however, represents a notable departure from IS's typical strategy in which its formal provinces usually form one, single, inter-connected territory or area of operations: ISCAP is split up between countries that do not share borders. (The IS province in Southeast Asia is different in that it spans multiple island nations due to geographical necessity.)

Since *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamma'ah* does not have a strong media and online presence, IS has come in strongly and filled in for any unclaimed attacks by the group. IS has so far claimed responsibility for 27 of the attacks, according to security analysts. Most of the attacks were carried out against the army; others were arson attacks on the homes of civilian Christians and attacks against alleged collaborators and spies for the army.⁵⁹ Apart from claiming responsibility for these attacks, IS has even published photos of Mozambican insurgents in their weekly magazine labeling them "soldiers of the caliphate".⁶⁰

7. Government efforts at quelling the levels of violence

With IS-backing, the ongoing insurgency in northern Mozambique has gathered pace and is showing a rise in the complexity of its attacks. This is despite operations being carried out in the region by the Mozambican army, aided by security personnel from a consortium of private contractors (see below).

In the aftermath of the Mocimbo de Praia attacks in October 2017, the government of Mozambique announced the start of a counter-insurgency operation and increased armed police presence in major towns, ports and border locations. The police arrested hundreds of people, and the army closed and destroyed mosques and killed dozens of people (including women and children) in indiscriminate attacks aimed at killing insurgents. This forced ASWJ to change tactics and focus on soft targets by targeting civilians instead of government troops.

The approach taken by the government to neutralize the Islamic militants has been judged heavy-handed by many observers. Heavy-handedness became particularly evident when two helicopters and a navy ship were deployed to shell the village of Mitumbate near Mocimboa da Praia on 23 and 24 December 2017, leading to the deaths of 50 civilians.⁶¹ The police have been accused of indiscriminately arresting random members of the Muslim population in Cabo Delgado and in closing mosques.

The government is unlikely to be able to contain ASWJ activities successfully due to the lack of available manpower and funds for military spending. Most of the army's equipment is from the colonial era, with recent estimates suggesting that only 10% of Mozambique's armored personnel

⁵⁹ BBC Monitoring, Analysis: Islamic State group seeks foothold in Mozambique, [1/5/2020], <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c2019jnz#section2>

⁶⁰ The Defence Post, Islamic State arrival in Mozambique further complicates Cabo Delgado violence, [1/5/2020] <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2019/06/13/islamic-state-mozambique-cabo-delgado-iscap/>

⁶¹ BBC News, How Mozambique's smuggling barons nurtured jihadists, [2/5/2020], <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-44320531>

carriers are operational. Land forces have also seen a significant reduction in strength from 13,000 troops in 2013 to 11,000 in 2020, as a result of high government debt.⁶² The inadequacies of the Mozambican army could seriously limit progress in containing the terrorist threat and this has led to talks with a consortium of private contractors who provide safety for gas exploration company workers. As a result, security forces belonging to the Russian private military company, Wagner, became involved. Its forces arrived in Mozambique in September 2019, but suffered a number of setbacks and casualties inflicted by ASWJ within the first two months of deployment.⁶³ Wagner has not left Mozambique, but it has had to significantly reassess the strength of its opponents, mainly because of the challenges posed by Mozambique's geographical terrain. Security analysts report that Wagner is regrouping and planning a better strategy for tackling the insurgent group.

The government of Mozambique has also introduced a new law that mandates a 40-year prison sentence for anyone involved in terrorism. On 3 August 2018, the Mozambican president announced the approval of additional counter-terrorism legislation referred to as the "Legal Regime for Repression and Combating Terrorism". This adds articles to the Mozambican 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 organization, as well as those who facilitate such travel.

Under this new law, the trial of captured militants started in October 2018 before a court in the high security prison of Pemba. There were 189 accused, mostly from Mozambique but also from Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Burundi and a verdict was delivered in April 2019. Of the 189 militants, the court gave 10 prison sentences where it was proven that they had participated in deadly attacks on the local population in Cabo Delgado Province.⁶⁴

Stricter legislation is however unlikely to deter fighters from joining the Islamist insurgency. Many Cabo Delgado citizens are desperate for employment and continue to view potential wages from illegal trafficking as a solution to their dire situation. The narcotics trade is flourishing due to the lack of any government response and through corruption at border posts and close coordination with IS. As a result, ASWJ is likely to have sufficient funding to continue attacks for the foreseeable future in Mozambique.

In addition to the above, Mozambican authorities are restricting the entry of journalists to Cabo Delgado and have detained several reporters who attempted to document the crisis.⁶⁵ Since June 2018, the government has barred various media organizations and correspondents from visiting the province; journalists who have managed to get in have either been detained by the army or

⁶² Mozambique Military Strength, [2/5/2020] https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=mozambique

⁶³ New York Times, Russia Exerts Growing Influence in Africa, Worrying Many in the West, [3/5/2020] <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/28/world/africa/russia-africa-troops.html>

⁶⁴ Africa News, 40-year jail term for 10 terrorists in northern Mozambique, [3/5/2020], <https://www.africanews.com/2019/04/25/40-year-jail-term-for-10-terrorists-in-northern-mozambique/>

⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch, Media barred from insurgent region, [3/5/2020], <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/02/21/mozambique-media-barred-insurgent-region>

arrested by the police on bogus charges. This has created an information vacuum that has allowed conspiracies theories to fester and caused a mushrooming of inconsistent reports.

An added problem is that government forces in the northern districts of Cabo Delgado conduct themselves as if the rule of law does not apply, ignoring domestic, regional and international human rights standards. The Constitution of the Republic of Mozambique has been suspended extrajudicially. Judged by the government's response to the insurgency crisis, it would seem that there is an undeclared state of emergency in Cabo Delgado. Such action is highly problematic, not only because it is unconstitutional, but also because it gives license to act without accountability - hence the reason for preventing journalists from reporting in this region. Journalists Amade Abubacar and Germano Adriano were arrested on 5 January and 6 February 2019 respectively for reporting on the conflict in Macomia.⁶⁶

8. Effects of the violent insurgency

ASWJ activity has increased in frequency, reach and brutality, with over 80 attacks taking place in the first four months of 2020. Since the initial attack in October 2017, there have now been over 350 subsequent attacks by the insurgent group.⁶⁷ The attacks have targeted civilians as well as state actors across the north of Mozambique. The violence has forced over 100,000 Mozambicans to flee, after homes and villages have been burned to the ground, and over 1,000 civilians (including children) have been injured or killed. The insurgents have also taken temporary control of whole towns. Thus, the violent insurgency is on the way to creating a new humanitarian crisis. The direct effects on citizens range from loss of life to displacement from homes, farms and businesses. A major impact has been that the instability and levels of fear in local communities have led to a food crisis (see below). Additionally, there has been the loss of (and inability to exercise) basic rights guaranteed by the Mozambican Constitution and international treaties that Mozambique has ratified.

Many residents of Cabo Delgado are afraid to venture out of their villages to plant or harvest crops. They no longer feel safe to enter forests to gather wild fruit, medicinal plants and firewood as they have traditionally done. As a result, food reserves are depleted and the crisis, coupled with cyclones Idai and Kenneth which hit Cabo Delgado in 2019, has left villagers powerless to replenish their reserves. The food shortage has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, hindering farmers from going to plant their crops and restricting the movement of goods from one country to another. Furthermore, the violent insurgency and the after-effects of the cyclones have already crippled purchasing power as businesses have been forced to close down due to the destruction of property and fear of further attacks.

The economic situation looks set to deteriorate further. Hunger was already affecting the nation prior to the explosion of violence and destruction by the cyclones. Over 2 million people were in

⁶⁶ Reporters Without Borders, Two Mozambican journalists freed after being held for months, [11/5/2020], <https://rsf.org/en/news/two-mozambican-journalists-freed-after-being-held-months>

⁶⁷ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Mozambique Update, Supra note 1

need of food assistance in 2019 according to the UN World Food Program. In the 2019 Global Hunger Index, which measures food supply, mortality rate and nutrition levels in a country, Mozambique ranks 96th out of 117 qualifying countries.⁶⁸ Hunger levels are certain to rise as measures are introduced to combat the COVID-19 outbreak.⁶⁹

The insurgency violence and displacement have also adversely affected education. Fleeing for their lives, parents are unlikely to send children to school, thereby further exacerbating the social effects of the violence. Many schools were reported to have closed after the attacks began, with teachers abandoning their posts out of fear.

9. The effect of the insurgency on Christians

9.1 A new wave of attacks

Although *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamma'ah* has not clearly proclaimed war against Christians, there have been attacks directed against Christian places of worship and Christians. Through the involvement of IS (given their modus operandi in the Middle East and Nigeria) the situation could develop into a fully-fledged persecution of Christians. The complexity of the situation and the direct impact of IS involvement can be seen in a new wave of attacks targeting Christians. Arson attacks on five Christian villages in Cabo Delgado were reported right after IS openly declared ASWJ's affiliation in 2019.⁷⁰

On 7 April 2020 ASWJ launched an attack on Meangalewa, located in the administrative post of Chitunda (in Muidumbe) where the militants destroyed a church.⁷¹ This attack was conducted in coordination with other attacks in the districts of Mocímboa da Praia and Quissanga. According to a local source, the insurgents entered the village and told the population that everyone should adhere to Islam. They did not kill anyone but tried to destroy one of the oldest Roman Catholic churches in Cabo Delgado, the Sacred Heart of Jesus situated in Nangololo. They looted the church and then tried to burn it down but only succeeded in burning the benches, a statue of the Virgin Mary and an image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. They did, however, manage to set the homes of missionaries on fire who fled before they could be harmed, while four other people were taken captive.⁷²

⁶⁸ Global Hunger Index, [10/5/2020], <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/results.html>

⁶⁹ Africa News, Coronavirus - Mozambique: Resettlement Sites in Need of Further Preparedness as COVID-19 Cases Increase in Mozambique [02/06/2020], <https://www.africanews.com/2020/06/02/coronavirus-mozambique-resettlement-sites-in-need-of-further-preparedness-as-covid-19-cases-increase-in-mozambique/>

⁷⁰ VOA, With Recent Terror Attacks, IS Expands Presence in Mozambique, [2/5/2020] <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/recent-terror-attacks-expands-presence-mozambique>

⁷¹ Club of Mozambique, Mozambique: Armed groups attack in Cabo Delgado, [15/5/2020], <https://clubofmozambique.com/news/mozambique-armed-groups-attack-in-cabo-delgado-157170/>

⁷² Aid to the Church in Need, Mozambique: Bishop speaks out following attacks blamed on ISIS, Supra note 6

Another attack against Christians took place on 12 May 2020 in an area frequently targeted over the past two years. The attack was aimed at the newly founded monastery of St Pachomius of the Missionary Benedictines in N'ngano, near the town of Mocimboa in Cabo Delgado Province.⁷³ The new monastery building was only inaugurated in 2019 and was founded by Ndanda Abbey in neighbouring Tanzania. It was looted and outbuildings were set on fire. The attack included the destruction of a hospital that the monks were building in the village. As in the attack in April, the monks were able to escape unharmed.

Cabo Delgado is a Muslim majority area and Christian religious leaders in the area are worried by ASWJ's IS-affiliation which could mean that attacks deliberately targeting Christians and their places of worship will increase.⁷⁴

9.2 Could ASWJ be following in Boko Haram's footsteps?

In order to understand the potential long-term impact of the Islamist insurgency on Christians in Mozambique, it is imperative to examine the case study of Nigeria and observe how the insurgent group Boko Haram evolved, which developed from a similar background to ASWJ, including the experience of marginalization, unemployment, illiteracy and the unequal distribution of resources.

Based in Nigeria, *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* (translated: People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad), better known as Boko Haram, is one of the most lethal insurgent groups in the world and is listed as the deadliest in sub-Saharan Africa according to the Global Terrorism Index of 2018.⁷⁵ Violent insurgency from the group has resulted in over 35,000 deaths and displaced millions since 2002 when the group was formed.⁷⁶

Boko Haram's initial years were spent as a non-violent religious movement and were characterized by relatively benign activities such as the provision of social services, with occasional bouts of criminality that, over time, escalated into violence in 2009.⁷⁷ A series of violent actions ultimately transformed Boko Haram from being a largely non-violent fundamentalist religious movement into the lethal and resilient force it is today, known internationally for its brutality. Both Boko Haram and ASWJ can be seen to have started off as non-violent groups which then began to incorporate increasing levels of aggression into their agendas.

Nigeria has long been the biggest oil producer in Africa, and Mozambique is likely to follow suit by being one of the biggest suppliers of natural gas. The existence of natural resources which do not benefit the surrounding community creates a socio-economic divide with many left feeling marginalized and turning to violence to bring about change. Just like ASWJ in Mozambique, Boko

⁷³ The Tablet, Islamists attack Benedictine community in Mozambique, [15/5/2020], <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/12937/islamists-attack-benedictine-community-in-mozambique>

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Terrorism Index 2019: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism, Sydney, November 2019, Available from: <http://visionofhumanity.org/reports>

⁷⁶ Ibid, p.19

⁷⁷ Matfess H, Boko Haram: History and Context, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017

Haram capitalized on long-standing perceptions of social, political and economic marginalization among the residents of north-eastern Nigeria.

As with the much younger ASWJ in Mozambique, Boko Haram is responsible not only for a regional food crisis that has devolved into famine in some areas, but also for the displacement of millions and the deaths of tens of thousands of people in Nigeria.

9.3 The Islamic State group's influence

What could prove to be particularly dangerous for the future of Christians in Mozambique is the fact that both ASWJ and Boko Haram are affiliated to the Islamic State group. Boko Haram identifies as the Islamic State West Africa Province, while *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamma'ah* identifies itself as the Islamic State Central Africa Province. This link to IS is cause for grave concern since IS mercilessly persecuted Christian minorities within the regions it controlled in Iraq and Syria. More specifically, they committed acts of murder and carried out enslavement, deportation, imprisonment, torture, abduction of women and children, exploitation, abuse, rape, sexual violence and forced marriages. They looted Christian homes, shops, schools and churches, confiscated valuables and possessions and burned down houses. Their acts were widely labelled as genocide by the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, the US Congress and the Secretary of State, the UK House of Commons, and the Lithuanian, Canadian, Australian, French, Hungarian, and Austrian parliaments.⁷⁸

The Islamic State group suffered major defeats and lost control over territory through the presence of US-led forces in Iraq and by the coordinated efforts of various countries in Syria. Naturally, the group is looking to increase its hold on other regions and all the more so in Africa, where insurgent groups have mushroomed in East, West and Central Africa. It has already succeeded in forging close contact with several Islamist insurgency groups in Nigeria, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso to form the Islamic State's Western Province and in DRC and Mozambique to form the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP).

Mozambique has all the indicators present for IS to thrive in recruiting and establishing itself, particularly since ASWJ was already fighting for the introduction of Sharia law. Mozambique's extreme poverty, unemployment levels and well-established routes for illegal arms dealing and human trafficking (modern-day slave trade) made it particularly interesting and vulnerable for IS's involvement. If the Mozambican government is unable to curb the growth of this radical Islamic insurgency, the Christian population will inevitably face the violence seen in other parts of the world carried out by Islamic State idealists.

9.4 Curtailment of civil, economic and social rights

⁷⁸ Raben S, The ISIS Eradication of Christians and Yazidis: Human Trafficking, Genocide, and the Missing International Efforts to Stop It (February 5, 2018), Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3118340> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3118340>

The state of Mozambique has a duty to ensure that it upholds all constitutional guarantees as provided in the Constitution of the Republic of Mozambique 2004 (“the Constitution”).⁷⁹ As a result of the continued attacks by ASWJ, the basic constitutionally guaranteed civil and social rights and freedoms of Christians are being hindered. The right to life, right to property, right to work, right to education, freedom from discrimination, freedom of movement, and - most importantly - the freedom of worship as guaranteed in international instruments ratified by the Mozambican government and contained in the Mozambican Constitution are under threat of curtailment for Christians and other non-Muslim residents living in Cabo Delgado Province.

The Constitution of Mozambique upholds the duty of respect and non-discrimination under Article 44. This right opposing discrimination is to be seen in relation to the rights to equality and religious freedom to practice a religion - as provided for by Article 54(1) of the Constitution. Article 54(2) of the Constitution further guarantees freedom from persecution by stating that no one should be prejudiced or deprived of their rights based on their religious affiliation. This article also includes a guarantee for the protection of places of worship. Article 12(3) reiterates this right by stating that religious denominations shall have organizational freedom, freedom to carry out their functions and freedom of worship, and they shall conform to the laws of the State. This freedom is also guaranteed in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights under Article 18.⁸⁰

The Christian residents of Cabo Delgado are being denied their basic right to religious freedom. They are being directly discriminated against by the Islamic militants who are repeatedly conducting attacks. Lately, the group has been forcing residents to denounce their religion and convert to Islam. Places of worship have been burned down and looted in direct contravention of the provision and Article 82(1) of the Constitution which guarantees a right to property and protection of that property.

More importantly, the right to life, the fundamental right of every human being, has been threatened as a result of the ongoing violence in Cabo Delgado. Article 40 of the Constitution guarantees the right to life, a right which has been denied to over 350 Mozambicans killed by Islamist insurgents since October 2017. The right to life also guarantees protection against torture and inhuman or degrading treatment. In addition to loss of life, the residents of Cabo Delgado experience violence carried out by Islamic militants on a regular basis, which has often forced them to flee their homes and livelihoods. Article 47 of the Constitution is also continually being contravened, since a large number of victims are children. They have faced violence and even death instead of being protected as the provision guarantees.

Article 55 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of movement. This can also be translated to include freedom from forced movement. The fact that over 115,000 residents of Cabo Delgado have been forced from their homes and have become internally displaced shows just how much the rights of these persons are being curtailed. Whole towns have been abandoned and for those who remain, the fear of possible further attacks permanently overshadow their lives. Fields have been abandoned; modes of subsistence have been totally stripped away; residents have thus

⁷⁹ The Constitution of the Republic of Mozambique 2004 (as amended in 2007)

⁸⁰ United Nations, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 16 December 1966

been unable to fend for themselves, further deepening the level of poverty and removing their ability to access basic needs such as food, water and shelter.

As a result of schools having to close down in the aftermath of violence, children have been unable to attend schools in direct contravention of a) the right to education guaranteed in Article 88 of the Constitution and b) the duty to protect children provided for under Article 47 of the Constitution, which could be translated to also include the duty to safeguard their future.

In order to guarantee these rights for all citizens of Mozambique, the government must ensure the protection of its citizens by making every effort to quash the insurgency. This is particularly urgent seeing that ASWJ looks like it is changing course to directly target Christians. It is important that measures are taken sooner rather than later before the situation escalates further. Taking Boko Haram's history as an example: It first practiced techniques for armed attack in general and then began to target Christians. The group's true intentions were not analyzed and addressed by the authorities in time.

10. Future outlook

Cabo Delgado Province, located far from Mozambique's capital city, Maputo, has long been neglected by the central government. This has led to high poverty rates, poor infrastructure and a lack of access to social services in comparison to the southern provinces of Mozambique. The wave of violence is therefore also an expression of tension between the country's north and south. The harsh response to the violence by the Mozambican security forces seems to have further alienated the population from the state. The illicit economy flourishing in the north has also repeatedly been associated with the wave of violence. The government needs to address these underlying issues if it wants to succeed in curbing the violent insurgency in Cabo Delgado.

Overcoming the crisis successfully will require the government to cultivate trust within the community while responding to the insecurity created by the insurgents. It will also require that the government responds to the legitimate grievances concerning Cabo Delgado's level of development and the effects of the expansion of the natural gas industry in the region. The government must address the social, economic, religious and political dynamics behind the insurgency, otherwise the attacks are very likely to continue.

The author of this paper recommends community and private business engagement, skills development and employment creation, supported by a level of military intervention in Cabo Delgado Province commensurate with countering and curtailing the ongoing violence perpetrated by the ASWJ insurgents. Inclusivity of local communities should take preference in any engagement plans while preventing foreign private military contractors from playing a role. A heavy-handed military approach runs a significant risk not only of increasingly violent reprisal attacks, but also of ASWJ attracting increased funding and possible assimilation by larger, better organized and equipped insurgent groups like al-Shabaab from Somalia and the Islamic State group.

While this approach needs the involvement of the local community and government, involvement at the international level is also crucial. The Mozambican government must build strong alliances with its regional neighbors – Kenya and Tanzania - backing military efforts with better intelligence and developmental methods of intervention that offer alternative pathways to potential recruits. How well Kenya controls the penetration of Islamists into Tanzania, and how successfully Tanzania can eliminate the route into Mozambique, will also determine what shape ASWJ takes in future.

10.1 The future of the Church in Mozambique

The role of churches as the bearers of peace and hope is even more vital with the ongoing exponential spread of violence in Cabo Delgado. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the Church to perform its role given that the Islamist insurgents are killing, torturing and forcing Christians into displacement. This has created an environment of fear for the Christian residents, churches and missions in Cabo Delgado.

The government's response to combat the insurgency has been focused on armed attack against the insurgents who are now backed by the Islamic State. It is imperative that the government of Mozambique revises its strategy to include key social factors in its response. It needs to deal with the root causes including the low level of development and high level of unemployment in Cabo Delgado. It could work together with the church, missions and other non-governmental actors by creating an environment which is friendly for operations in Mozambique to help secure jobs for residents in Cabo Delgado. This way, they will be less inclined to join the insurgency.

If feasibly active measures are not taken to deal with the insurgency, it could grow and extend to other provinces in Mozambique beyond Cabo Delgado and become a nationwide problem (and, later on, possibly a regionwide problem). This possible implication should be highlighted by the government and the Church at a local and international level. Without a feasible response, Mozambique could become the next Nigeria or Kenya where violence against Christianity has become a common occurrence through the activity of Boko Haram in Nigeria and al-Shabaab in Kenya.

11. Recommendations

To sustainably resolve an insurgency requires a government action plan that blends military, humanitarian, economic and political responses. Such a plan could be based on the one presented in the comprehensive guide to counter-insurgency developed by the US government:⁸¹

⁸¹ United States Government Inter-Agency Counter-Insurgency Initiative, United States Government Counterinsurgency Guide, January 2009, [5/5/2020] <https://info.publicintelligence.net/USCOINstrategy2009.pdf>

- First and foremost, the intelligence capability in the armed forces should utilize a central military command center which liaises with community representatives and other sources to identify and target ringleaders of the insurgent group. Also, good intelligence should inform of imminent attacks, how the insurgents are supplied, where they keep their weapons and how they recruit.
- A multi-party liaison committee should be appointed with representatives from private business, the local community and government to assess risks and discuss methods of intervention on a regular basis.
- With a focus on the north-eastern areas of Cabo Delgado, at-risk targets of strategic and economic value should be identified and plans developed with stakeholders to safeguard such locations, for example: Tourist-frequented places, military, police and government installations, and business infrastructure.
- A cross-border cooperation plan should be set up with Tanzanian authorities to share intelligence, coordinate anti-smuggling action and counter illegal migration across the porous Tanzania-Mozambique border. A cooperation plan should involve an appeal to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) member states to assist Mozambique in the deployment of troops and resources to fight the insurgency. In a meeting in May 2020, the defense and security organ of SADC met to assess the security situation in Mozambique. However, despite recommendations to SADC member states to support the government of Mozambique in fighting against armed groups in Cabo Delgado, it remained unclear what support Mozambique would receive. Mozambique should recommend an actionable plan as this insurgency is likely to affect neighboring states in the near future.
- More importantly, the viability of skills development and employment creation among teenagers and young adults in the affected areas should be analyzed and an action plan created to address the key trigger of marginalization.
- Mozambique should consider studying the content and influence of violent extremist messages reaching Mozambican youth through local insurgents and the Islamic State group. The government would do well to revisit how international scholarships for education abroad in places like Sudan and Saudi Arabia are impacting religious discourse within Mozambique. Ultimately, government officials may need to encourage or even develop alternative narratives that are credible and persuasive among Mozambican Muslims.
- Relief should be provided by the government in coordination with local and international aid agencies after careful assessment of the most immediate needs of the affected and at-risk communities, focusing on the districts of Palma, Mocimboa da Praia, and Nangade.
- In the long run, the government and the prosecuting agency have to demonstrate the commitment to initiate disciplinary action and prosecution against any known acts of bribery and corruption. Given that Mozambique has already established a new Counter-Terrorism Unit within the National Criminal Investigation Service (SERNIC), the body must conduct effective prosecutions.

These recommendations are primarily for the management of the threat of violence combining proportional use of military force with the implementation of non-military projects to improve

the conditions on the ground, especially for the unemployed youth who are being targeted for recruitment by insurgent leaders.

Southern Africa has been in lockdown since March 2020 to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus, and this has distracted the government's ability to focus fully on the insurgency, thus creating a perfect opportunity for ASWJ's activities to grow. Judging by the recent pattern of increased attacks, more military setbacks should be expected in the coming months. However, the Mozambican government can still prevail in this crisis if – as discussed above - it seriously reforms its methods of armed intervention and focuses on community projects assisting marginalized youth.

Aside from the Islamist insurgency, the peace process between ruling party FRELIMO and the opposition movement RENAMO has advanced well. A peace agreement was signed and the 2019 elections were held peacefully. The process of demobilization, disarmament and reintegration of RENAMO fighters is proceeding and RENAMO is becoming less of a threat to the government in power. The government's ongoing efforts to maintain peace and enhance social cohesion are essential to foster economic development and inclusive growth in a sustainable manner.⁸²

The development challenges facing Mozambique are not unique. They are indeed shared by many countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Extreme poverty, high levels of debt, slow private sector development, limited job opportunities, particularly for the youth, are unfortunately familiar features of many countries in the African region. The government needs to find ways so that the country's natural and human resources can be used effectively to ignite economic growth, with benefits being injected back to the wider citizenship instead of only profiting a few elite individuals or groups in the community. A strong and unwavering commitment to sound economic policies and structural reforms, particularly those aimed at strengthening governance, transparency and the fight against corruption, will be critical to transform the Mozambican economy and enhance a better future for all Mozambicans.

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