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Insurgency in Northern Mozambique: Nature and Responses

An armed Islamic State-linked insurgency in Mozambique’s far north—launched in 2017 with an attack on several police posts in Cabo Delgado province—remains highly active and poses challenges to U.S. peace, security, and development goals in the country. The insurgency and state security responses to it have resulted in many serious human rights abuses and killings, widespread social trauma and property destruction, and massive population displacements, creating a complex humanitarian crisis. Insurgent attacks also prompted the French energy firm TotalEnergies (Total) to declare force majeure and suspend a \$20 billion, partially U.S. government-financed natural gas processing project, one of several major projects designed to tap large gas fields discovered offshore in 2010.

Congressional hearings have monitored the insurgency and responses to it, and the House is considering H.Res. 720 (Jacobs (CA)), which calls for enhanced efforts to counter the insurgency and promote human rights. In April 2022, the Biden Administration chose Mozambique to receive new U.S. aid under the Global Fragility Act (2019).

The insurgents, locally dubbed Al Shabaab (“the youth,” also the name of a separate Al Qaeda-linked Somali group), also are known as Ahlu Sunna Wa-Jamo (“Adherents of the Sunnah” or ASWJ; spellings vary) and other names. In 2019, ASWJ reportedly pledged fealty to the Islamic State (IS or ISIS), which often claims the group’s attacks and had counted it as a member of the IS Central Africa Province, jointly with a group in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In May 2022, IS appeared to elevate ASWJ, labeling it the IS “Wilayah [Province] Mozambique.”

Figure 1. Cabo Delgado Province, Mozambique



Source: CRS.

leaders, a Tanzanian and a Mozambican, were later named U.S. Specially Designated Global Terrorists. The United States also has sanctioned an alleged IS-M financier. These actions freeze any U.S.-based IS-M property and ban transactions between IS-M and U.S. persons.

Tactics. Initially, IS-M used bladed weapons and some guns, but since 2018, IS-M has become increasingly well-armed and hit progressively more significant targets.

IS-M often attacks security force posts and convoys, civilian state workers and facilities (e.g., schools and clinics), and rural villages and road traffic. Its fighters frequently loot or burn food and other property, and injure, kill, or kidnap residents, especially youths and women. The rationale for IS-M’s attacks often is unclear, but some, notably several mass beheadings—a notorious IS tactic globally—appear intended to punish perceived IS-M foes, such as state workers, those who resist IS-M recruitment, including children, or persons whom IS-M suspects of cooperating with authorities.

Occasionally, IS-M has warned civilians of impending attacks, limited arson to state or large business facilities, distributed looted food, and preached to locals. It also reportedly endeavors to religiously indoctrinate its captives. IS-M reportedly recruits on the basis of ideology; by force; by offering payments to fighters; and by financing micro-entrepreneurs, whom IS-M then may extort for revenue or intelligence. It also kidnaps for ransom and may receive funds and other aid from IS supporters abroad.

Capacity. IS-M’s military prowess has grown since 2017; it has repeatedly executed complex operations (e.g., concurrent attacks on multiple targets or major towns, boat-based maritime assaults on local sea traffic and islands, and cross-border attacks into Tanzania). It also has held territory, such as the port town of Mocimboa da Praia (between August 2020 and 2021), and regularly seeks to infiltrate security forces and civilian populations. IS-M fighters often wear state military uniforms and reportedly use arms looted from state forces, as well as drones and locally atypical weapons, suggesting they may have access to illicit arms trade networks.

In March 2021, IS-M attacked Palma, a coastal town and site of the large natural gas processing plant being developed by the Total-led energy firm consortium. The attack resulted in mass fatalities, including multiple beheadings, and threatened the plant, which was under construction, and its workers. Thousands of Palma residents seeking safety fled to the plant site’s perimeter, which IS-M did not breach. During the attack, state security forces assigned to protect the Total site remained embedded there while IS-M fighters overran Palma, though other state forces later cleared Palma of insurgents. Nonetheless, Total suspended the project and withdrew its staff, pending a return to long-term stability in and around the site.

Events following the attack highlighted poor behavior by some national forces. After the attack, a group of soldiers reportedly extensively looted banks in Palma. In addition, internally displaced persons (IDPs) who remained near the Total site after the attack also reported that security forces extorted bribes from those seeking to flee and sold food supplies to stranded IDPs at inflated prices. Months after

the attack, in July 2021, Rwandan troops deployed to Mozambique (see below) and since have reportedly stabilized Palma and nearby districts.

Drivers. A confluence of local socioeconomic grievances and religious aims appear to motivate IS-M, which seeks to supplant the secular state with Islamic Sharia law-based governance. In explaining the insurgency's evolution, however, researchers debate the relative strength, logic, and nature of linkages between these and other factors, such as local versus foreign influences that may shape the group.

A key grievance is the state's historical marginalization of Cabo Delgado, one of Mozambique's poorest regions, and resulting high rates of poverty, socioeconomic inequality, and youth unemployment. The state's displacement of some villagers and transfer of their traditional lands to the Total gas project, the perceived low share of gas sector jobs given to locals, disruptions of livelihoods, and the influence of foreign extractive industry actors also have driven tensions. Human rights abuses and corruption in the context of counterterrorism operations also have spurred discontent.

Local and national elites' efforts to control valuable local natural resources (e.g., land, precious stones, gold, and timber) through political influence, corrupt dealings, and force, also have spurred resentments. Other corruption in Cabo Delgado is reportedly tied to trafficking in natural resources, persons, and illegal drugs, though the drug trade appeared to move south as insurgent violence grew. Some analysts have suggested that IS-M may exploit such illicit activity, but open-source evidence to that effect is lacking.

Insurgency: Makeup and Origins

IS-M reportedly evolved from one or more dissident Muslim sects that rejected the authority of and clashed with local, predominantly Sufi Muslim leaders. Sect beliefs appear to have been influenced by Islamists from other East African countries, some of whom reportedly pursued anti-state attacks in Tanzania before fleeing to Cabo Delgado to escape a violent crackdown by Tanzanian authorities. Returnees from Islamic study abroad also may have introduced violent jihadist precepts. Sect members reportedly adopted their own form of dress; rejected secular justice, schools, health services, and voting; and advocated for Sharia law-based governance.

Arrests of alleged insurgents, eyewitness accounts, and other sources suggest that IS-M leaders include Tanzanians and locals, who, along with members of various other nationalities comprise its fighting forces. Local fighters include members of the coastal, Muslim Mwani people and the largely non-Muslim, inland Makonde ethnic group.

Humanitarian Situation & Responses. As of early 2022, at least 784,000 people had fled insurgency-linked violence in Cabo Delgado, including most of Palma's prior 75,000-person population; some estimates suggest that the IDP population may as large as 1 million. Up to 70% of IDPs may not be officially registered, as many lack ID papers, making them ineligible for relief aid and hindering travel and access to public services. A series of attacks in southern Cabo Delgado in May and June 2022 have caused new displacement. Many IDPs, about half of whom are children, live in host communities, primarily in southern Cabo Delgado, though some live in temporary camps. Most IDPs

cannot flee the country as refugees, as Tanzania, the country nearest to Cabo Delgado, reportedly often forcibly returns to Mozambique those seeking refuge.

U.N. agencies and other humanitarian actors often lack access to the northeastern Cabo Delgado due to insecurity and bureaucratic obstacles. In areas where aid agencies have access, they are providing food, basic supplies, and psychosocial help for the many IDPs traumatized by exposure to severe violence. Food insecurity is widespread across Cabo Delgado, as are unmet healthcare needs; the conflict also has damaged or forced about a third of health facilities to close. As of April 2022, 16% of a \$437 million U.N.-wide humanitarian appeal centered on Cabo Delgado was funded. U.S. humanitarian aid for Mozambique, including \$55 million in FY2022 (as of May 18, most recent data), is primarily allocated to Cabo Delgado and bordering provinces hosting IDPs.

Other Responses. National military-led efforts to counter IS-M, backed by paramilitary police and military contractors, have had mixed success. Key challenges have included low levels of public trust in security forces, logistical gaps, and lack of capacity to concurrently protect state-controlled areas, respond to IS-M attacks, and take offensive action. In mid-2021, the government accepted foreign offers of combat troops and trainers. In early July, Rwanda deployed 1,000 combat troops to Cabo Delgado under a bilateral agreement, and may now have as many as 2,000 troops on the ground. Weeks later, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) began to deploy its own regional intervention force to Cabo Delgado. In the ensuing months, these foreign forces were able to stabilize large areas, kill many insurgents, and seize IS-M camps. IS-M has nonetheless remained highly active and in May and June 2022 launched attacks in new areas. Meanwhile, U.S. Special Operations Forces have been training Mozambican military forces, is the European Union.

In addition to military efforts, many observers contend that ending the insurgency would require programs to increase social cohesion, including in religious contexts, and restore livelihoods and social services, followed by longer-term development investments. The World Bank is financing a plan by the state's nascent Northern Integrated Development Agency focusing on such ends, as well as several other projects benefitting vulnerable populations in the north. This aid is worth roughly \$550 million. Prospects for success arguably are mixed, given the ongoing conflict and the scope and complexity of the challenges at issue.

U.S. Interests & Responses. The insurgency affects substantial U.S. interests, notably a \$4.7 billion U.S. Export-Import Bank loan for the Total project and up to \$1.5 billion in U.S. International Development Finance Corporation political risk insurance for a separate planned ExxonMobil-led gas project. A range of U.S. foreign aid and security cooperation programs aim to build national security forces' capacities, foster economic development, and counter violent extremism. Some of this aid is separate from broader, non-insurgency-specific U.S. bilateral assistance worth an estimated \$537 million in FY2021.

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