

National and regional responses to the Cabo Delgado crisis

Failures and opportunities for change

Summary

Northern Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province has been the site of an escalating insurgency since 2017. As the severity of the insurgency has grown, so too has the potential for the conflict to negatively impact upon the wider region. SADC's response has been slow and has failed to take into account the broader dynamics of the insurgency, while the Mozambican government has pursued a militarised approach. Without significant efforts to address the transnational dimensions of the wider conflict system and the local socio-economic grievances that fuel recruitment, the insurgency is likely to continue to deepen and spread across the region.

Introduction

Since October 2017, northern Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province has been the site of an escalating insurgency. An estimated 2 614 civilians have lost their lives in over 800 violent incidents, resulting in a major humanitarian crisis.¹ By April 2021, the conflict has seen the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) rise to 662 828.²

The widespread destruction of public infrastructure has put additional strain on already limited public services, particularly undermining access to healthcare and education.

To date, the government's response has been focused on using its police and military forces – with the help of private military companies (PMCs) – to roll back the insurgency. This has proven ineffective and potentially counterproductive.

As the severity of the insurgency has grown, so too has the potential for the conflict to negatively impact upon the wider region. Mozambique shares borders with Malawi, South Africa, Eswatini, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Tanzania; all members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Several SADC states rely on Mozambican ports to access international markets and some, such as Zimbabwe, also rely on Mozambique for much of their food and electricity imports.

Mozambique has long been a key node in the illicit economy, including the international drug trade, and other forms of transnational criminal activity, such as human trafficking, illegal wildlife trafficking and the illicit trade in minerals.³

If deeper ties are established between Ahlu-Sunna Wa-Jama'a (ASWJ) and the Islamic State (IS), the potential for the conflict to spread across borders increases in several aspects. ASWJ could actively seek to launch attacks in neighbouring states. The insurgency could also incite local Islamist cells in neighbouring states, emboldening them to carry out attacks on local targets as well as

THE TOLL OF THE CRISIS

since October 2017

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generating a greater flow of militant actors across the region.⁴ ASWJ could increasingly embed themselves and strengthen jihadist and transnational organised crime networks, with multiple nodes across several states.⁵ Lastly, the conflict has the potential to generate increased migrations flows – including refugees, asylum seekers, displaced persons and economic migrants – across the region, putting further economic strain on governments, inciting xenophobic violence, and eroding social cohesion.

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Despite these regional implications, the SADC response to date has been ineffective. On 23 June, SADC announced that it had approved the deployment of a standby force to assist in combatting the insurgency.⁶ Yet the approach has been widely criticised for being top-down and failing to take into account the broader developmental challenges that created a fertile breeding ground for extremism.

This brief first analyses the drivers of the conflict in Mozambique, and then examines national and regional responses. It identifies the gaps between these responses and provides policy recommendations for how they may be addressed.

Drivers of the conflict

Cabo Delgado displays both the structural drivers and trigger factors commonly seen in the emergence of violent extremism – including political marginalisation along ethno-religious lines; high levels of deprivation, criminality and poor governance; the presence of radical religious actors; and intra-religious conflict.⁷

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Over the last three years, ASWJ, referred to locally as Al-Shabaab, has grown in resilience, operational capacity, and confidence. What started out as an inexperienced militia armed mostly with machetes and axes has become a formidable insurgent force estimated at around 2 500 members, operating within 19 cells across Cabo Delgado

province.⁸ This growth is likely the result of a combination of factors (see box):

Factors contributing to the growth of the ASWJ

- Strengthened organisational cohesion;
- The accrual of more battlefield experience;
- The ability to attract foreign fighters and financial support as a result of a pledging allegiance to IS;
- A growing intelligence network among local communities;
- Refinement of propaganda messaging and a growing base of recruits among the youth, internally displaced persons and victims of state violence;
- The accumulation of food, weapons and other supplies, as well as territory;
- Growing financial means through the extortion of people and businesses, engaging in transnational illicit activities, and the attraction of foreign financial support;
- Increasing contact with transnational illicit networks to facilitate weapons supply.

As argued by Morier-Genoud (2020), early confrontations – rather than dialogue – between Mozambican security forces and members of ASWJ prior to 2017 likely contributed to the militarisation of the group.⁹ Following early attacks by ASWJ, the Mozambican government first reacted to the insurgency by denying its existence and attempting to downplay the extent of the problem.¹⁰ At the same time, government launched mass dragnet arrests, bolstered police presence in the region, and closed at least two mosques associated with ASWJ members.

As outlined by Pirio et al (2018), rumours of disappearances and extrajudicial executions by Mozambican security forces began to circulate widely at this time, and some youth fled into Tanzania to avoid persecution.¹¹ Human Rights Watch (2018) also documented several instances of human rights violations at the hands of the Mozambican security sector, as well as the targeting of journalists attempting to report on the violence.¹² This has likely served to enflame local grievances and strengthen ASWJ recruitment drives.¹³

In late 2018, for the first time, the Mozambican government seemed to begin to publicly acknowledge the potential need for international support to stem the violence in the northern part of the country. However, President Filipe Nyusi, as Chairperson of SADC, did not choose to place the issue on the SADC agenda until May

2019. Soon after, Mozambique invited the Wagner Group, a Russian PMC. Wagner withdrew shortly after a surprise attack on their camp by insurgents in Mozambican army uniforms. They were followed by the Dyck Advisory Group (DAG), a South African-based private security company.¹⁴

Mozambique's reluctance to let in outside help beyond the use of PMCs has contributed to the current reality whereby a range of international actors – including the United States, the European Union, Russia and, as mentioned, various PMCs – are engaged in a range of disparate security, humanitarian, and development initiatives. These occur on a bilateral and ad hoc basis, outside of any overarching strategy or framework.

SADC responses to the conflict

According to SADC procedures, the Mozambican government needs to bring the issue to the regional body before it is officially tabled for discussion. Yet Mozambique initially chose to deny the severity of the problem. Only on 19 May 2020, at a SADC Extraordinary Organ Troika plus the Republic of Mozambique Summit in Harare, Zimbabwe, did the Mozambican government place the conflict in Cabo Delgado on the agenda. The official communiqué from the meeting however simply condemned the attack, and urged SADC member states to support the Mozambican government in its fight against the insurgency.¹⁵ Subsequent SADC meetings in August and November 2020 also failed to produce results, with growing frustration among some SADC member states to determine a regional response.¹⁶ In January 2021, South African Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Naledi Pandor publicly voiced frustration at SADC's inability 'to arrive at an agreement as to what form of support we might provide'.¹⁷

Regional civil society organisations have also expressed frustration over both SADC and the AU's lack of a meaningful response to the escalating conflict.¹⁸ However, the relationship between SADC and CSOs in the region is fraught with difficulties.¹⁹ The state-centric nature of SADC means it is difficult for civil society to meaningfully engage with the body, despite ample research showing the benefits of civil society engagement with national and regional governance institutions – including the ability to act as drivers of people-centred regionalism.²⁰ The AU and its organs are bound by the principle of subsidiarity, which compels the continental body to defer to the regional economic communities (RECs) in responding to regional conflicts. There are still several entry points, however, such as tabling the issue for discussion at the level of the PSC, and put on the agenda by the rotating chair of the month, among others.²¹

In April 2021, SADC directed a technical deployment mission to the Republic of Mozambique, while Nyusi continued to emphasise the importance of sovereignty. The leaked report recommended support to the Mozambican Defence Forces, while at the same time proposing the deployment of a 3 000-wide SADC force to Cabo Delgado. As the Centre for Democratic Dialogue (CDD) notes: '... several of its claims, particularly in sections 2.10 – 2.13 (Intelligence Analysis), are highly questionable and merit further scrutiny'.²² For example, the CDD questions the claims of external support from foreign terrorists and stresses that the emergence of the conflict is rather due to local dynamics, including the disenfranchisement of local communities. As such, any solutions must take into account community engagement.

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Despite such criticisms, SADC has now approved the deployment of a standby force to Mozambique. The force may provide support to quell the insurgency, but is unlikely to do much to address its root causes.

In the past, three major challenges have been identified related to SADC's inability to play a useful peacemaking role, namely:

- ❶ The absence of common values among member states, with two key lines of division: first, between democratic and authoritarian tendencies in the domestic policies of states, and second, between pacific and militarist orientations in their foreign policies;
- ❷ An unwillingness by SADC member states to surrender a measure of sovereignty to a security regime that encompasses binding rules and the possibility of interference in domestic affairs; and
- ❸ A region characterised by underdevelopment and weak administrative capacity, which undermine the effectiveness of all SADC's forums and programmes.²³

These dynamics seem to have played out in the continued reticence of Mozambique to call on SADC to assist in a

regional response plan. Given the track record of SADC member states up to this point, it is doubtful whether a meaningful regional roadmap will be produced, and if so, whether such a roadmap could be meaningfully implemented without interference from the government of Mozambique. However, if the Mozambican government continues to pursue a purely militarised approach to the insurgency – without significant efforts to address the transnational dimensions of the wider conflict system, and the local socio-economic grievances that fuel recruitment – the insurgency is likely to continue to deepen and spread across the region.

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In March 2020, the Mozambican government established the Agency for the Integrated Development of the North (ADIN), which could serve to address some of these socio-economic grievances. The public institution is intended to stimulate the development of the northern region of the country and make better use of existing natural resources in the provinces of Cabo Delgado, Niassa and Nampula.²⁴ However, to date, ADIN exists largely on paper and has been criticised for its slow operationalisation.

In sum, SADC's response has been slow and has failed to take into account the broader dynamics of the insurgency. Much more must be done if the insurgency is to be quelled. As such, recommendations towards SADC are made below.

Recommendations for SADC

- ✓ Establish an impartial committee of experts to undertake a fact-finding mission into the root causes of conflict in northern Mozambique.
- ✓ Produce a regional response plan which addresses the humanitarian, socio-economic, judicial and security dimensions of the conflict, and provides clear guidelines for multisectoral engagement.
- ✓ Commission a baseline study into the vulnerabilities of all SADC states to violent extremism, including the mapping of extant militant networks in the region.
- ✓ Support the training of the Mozambican Defence Forces on human-rights based approaches and adopt a zero-tolerance approach to violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.
- ✓ Strengthen efforts to hold its member states accountable in ensuring fundamental economic and social rights.
- ✓ Develop a framework for community engagement, not only in intelligence gathering and policing, but also in designing appropriate policy responses – such as national plans of action to prevent violent extremism.
- ✓ Enable continuous input into policy-making, feedback and formalised relations with a wider range of civil society organisations.

Endnotes

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