

Mozambique's Cabo Delgado Province: Commonalities and discrepancies with other African lands of "self-proclaimed jihad"

By Benjamin Augé

Summary

This paper sets out to explore the specifics of Northern Mozambique, where a self-proclaimed Islamist movement has been active over the past three years. The movement's activity brought the roll-out of one of Africa's premier projects in recent economic history, to a halt in December 2020, for an undetermined duration. Mozambican authorities now need to fully address security challenges, to enable Total to resume operations as soon as possible.

Introduction

The death toll from self-proclaimed Islamist group “Al Shebab” in northern Mozambique has continued to rise unabated since October 2017, now counting over 2,500 deaths and hundreds of thousands displaced. The movement captured international media attention with (i) its allegiance to the Islamic State (EI) in July 2019, although operational links - if any - between the two have yet to be established, and from (ii) the threat it represents to the development of massive gas reserves off the

coast of Cabo Delgado province, that the armed group calls home. Total, the oil major in charge of developing these offshore fields, was forced to halt operations in December 2020 because of “Al Shebab” activity around its future gas production site in Afungi. Mozambique’s “Al Shebab”, also sometimes referred to as “Ansar Al Sunna”, sow chaos in some of Mozambique’s poorest areas, a country that itself is three times poorer than the African average. While some elements are common to recent cases of self-proclaimed Jihadi movement in West Africa, others are unique to Cabo Delgado.

What commonalities do they have with other self-proclaimed Jihadi movements in West Africa?

A number of commentators attempt to equate various violent Islamist movements active in Africa with the lesser-known and more recent case of Mozambique. There are, of course, similarities between these cases. The province of Cabo Delgado, for one, is over 2,700 kilometers from the capital Maputo and has remained on the fringe of post-civil war development since 1992. This echoes the situation of Northern Mali, a fertile breeding grounds for such violent groups, as this territory was historically marginalized by Bamako relative to the country's southern provinces. The massive influx of armed groups into the area from Libya following the demise of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, added to existing tensions, undermining what little control the Malian state had. Another common feature of both Mozambique and the Sahel is the conflict between traditional Muslims influenced by local practices and a more rigorous type of Islam promoted by radical, Wahabi groups. This clash of differing religious practice was clearly at play in Mali, and as such has also been for several years, well before 2017, in the province of Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. The pattern also resembles that of Boko Haram in Nigeria, who, starting in 2003, sought to impose a literalist application - at least in its own view - of Sharia law. Boko Haram's founder, Mohamed Yusuf, considered the political leadership of the Nigerian State of Borno, led at the time by Governor Ali Modou Sherif, not strict enough in implementing and enforcing a more rigorous practice of Islam in the territory bordering Chad and Niger.

The marginalization of a territory, on top of divergent religious practices: Radicals, forcing locals to adhere to a particular vision of Sharia law, along with endemic poverty and low levels of education in impacted areas, is a narrative we have seen before. Gradually, religious movements become violent and no longer content with a discourse of religious observance, shift towards anti-Stateism. Boko Haram took this turn in 2009 when the army and police killed a thousand of the group's militants and its leader in prison. This new phase started in Mozambique, in 2017, with the first violent actions and conquest of territories, albeit punctual, including the port of Mocimboa da Praia - attacked and

occupied many times since. This phase brought with it a strategy of attrition towards everything representing the State: police stations, military garrisons and control of roadways; ransoming drivers and passengers and seizing their goods. Local populations, of course, are the first victims of the group and are also directly targeted in Mozambique, with villages pillaged and massacres regularly perpetrated.

Distinctive features of the Mozambican case

While self-proclaimed violent Islamist movements across Africa share a number of similarities, Mozambique is unique in many ways. For one thing, and unlike northern Mali or northern Nigeria, where Islam is essentially the sole practiced religion, Cabo Delgado is not exclusively Muslim. The Maconde, a major ethnic component of the region, are Christian, sometimes Evangelicals, while Muslims are mainly Mwani, another tribe that is more prevalent along the coast. Marginalization comes with a gradient here as well. In other words, in a territory already marginalized by the central government in Maputo, the Mwani, who are Muslim, are even more heavily sidelined by the Maconde, since the country gained independence. The Maconde are strongly represented in the central government. Filipe Nyusi, the current president of Mozambique, in power since 2015, is a Maconde, as is former minister of defense and independence fighter General Alberto Chipande, and former prime minister and retired general, Raimundo Pachinupa. All three are long-time members of Frelimo's politburo. Cabo Delgado's political elite is certainly present on the national stage, yet this does not preclude a significant portion of the province's population, primarily Muslim, from being left on the sidelines in a territory already marginalized because of its remoteness from all major urban centers of the developing country. Cabo Delgado is predominantly Muslim, while Mozambique's population as a whole is predominantly Christian (60%).

Cabo Delgado also stands out compared to other areas of "self-proclaimed jihadism" in Africa because of its

enormous gas resources¹. These are not onshore, but offshore, on blocks 1 (Total) and 4 (ENI and ExxonMobil). Local “Shebab” groups have targeted the Total LNG train construction project underway in Afungi Peninsula since 2019. Attacks by the group around the site, starting in late 2020, were nevertheless never intended to take over the resource. Production infrastructure has yet to be built, and production requires expertise and technical skills that only leading oil companies can provide. The actions are more of a political message from the group to the government, and can be best expressed as follows: “you are not in control of our territory, nor are you in control of this giant investment site”. As combat drew closer to the worksite a few months ago, tensions within the government mounted, and yet response on the ground remained ineffective. The December 2020 shut-down by Total and its subcontractors was perceived as a genuine humiliation to the ruling Frelimo in Maputo. Total had planned to resume operations on March 24, 2021. But the deadly attacks on the town of Palma, less than ten kilometers from Afungi, occurred on that same day, postponing the resumption of operations yet again.

What consequences for Total?

The latest March 2021 attack clearly achieved its goal of humiliating the government. The Mozambican military had great difficulty repelling the attackers outside the town of Palma (population 75,000). The March 24 attack, lasting several days, claimed the lives of many Mozambicans and Westerners alike. The group therefore had ample opportunity to convey its message that the Frelimo government is incapable of protecting the territory, including in strategic areas.

Today, one has to wonder what Total, who planned to bring 12.9 million tons of gas to market per year via its two projected liquefaction trains by 2024, intends to do over the coming months. Employees of both the group and its subcontractors vacated the area as of March 24. Some had already been relocated to Maputo or South

1. There are no specific resources in the Nigerian State of Borno (no oil and very few minerals), nor in northern Mali, contrary to what is sometimes reported. Oil companies ENI and Sonatrach did hold blocks in northern Mali, but have not drilled a single well there over the past 20 years. There is consequently little evidence of possible commercial development of this huge area, a part of the Taoudeni basin (shared with Mauritania and Algeria). Total and Repsol wells have indeed been drilled on the Mauritanian side of the basin, but all have proved dry. Oil companies have therefore left.

Africa, after an initial suspension of work in December 2020. Now, however, the suspension will last longer: a year, maybe more. The oil company announced April 26 it was using legal force majeure provisions to freeze its contract with the Mozambican government. It also suspended practically all service contracts signed with subcontractors in recent years. Nonetheless, given the level of reserves off Cabo Delgado, Total is unlikely to give up on Mozambique easy. Together, both blocks - Total’s and ENI/ExxonMobil’s - hold over 160 trillion cubic feet of gas, nearly as much as Nigeria, with Africa’s largest reserves. Should this volume actually be brought on stream, the country’s throughput could reach some 60 to 80 million tons, equivalent to the current level of Qatar - itself the world’s largest LNG exporter. Total will not, however, return to Cabo Delgado unless the government provides sufficient security for site and personnel. On his last visit in January 2021, Total’s CEO Patrick Pouyanné requested that President Filipe Nyusi set up a 25-kilometer belt around Afungi in which full security conditions be maintained. Nyusi agreed, and there was a deceptive lull in hostilities on the ground until Palma was attacked on March 24.

The Mozambican army is, however, particularly dysfunctional. Troops deployed to the front lines are demoralized and military intelligence largely deficient, complicating the fight against self-proclaimed Islamists. As targets are not clearly identified, the military often targets citizens with nothing to do with the movement, further exacerbating anti-government sentiment among a population with no religious or political affinity to the radical movement.

Portugal announced early in April, it was sending 60 military trainers to assist Mozambican Special Forces. The European Union (EU) also supports the Mozambican government with training and/or equipment. The Southern African Development Community (SADC), comprising all 16 countries of the southern African region, also awaits specific requests from the Mozambican government to help restore order in the North. Filipe Nyusi has been extremely skeptical of foreign intervention and has for months been ambiguous on what he expects from his partners in the region, particularly South Africa, resorting instead to hired mercenaries, including Russia’s Wagner and South African’s Dyck Advisory Group (DIG). These failed to roll back the terrorist movement. Combating the movement requires coordinated security operations,

particularly with neighboring Tanzania², along with in-depth sociological understanding of its membership, to contain and possibly eradicate it. Both objectives, as well as Mozambican army and intelligence services reform, will no doubt take many years. Oil Company Total will probably have to settle for “bunkerized” operations should it decide to resume activities in Cabo Delgado in 2022.

2. Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi and his Tanzanian counterpart John Magufuli (who died in March 2021) hardly spoke to each other until late 2020. The two finally came together just a few months ago as the radical group increased its activities in Cabo Delgado. This enmity between the two presidents clearly worked to the advantage of the Mozambican Shebab, because of the lack of intelligence sharing and the porous border (Cabo Delgado borders Tanzania).

About the author, Benjamin Augé

Benjamin Augé is a Research Associate at the Africa and Energy Centers of the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) since June 2010. He holds a PhD in geography from the French Institute of Geopolitics (University of Paris 8) and teaches the geopolitics of oil and gas in Africa at the University of Nouakchott, Mauritania. He is also a lecturer at the Netherlands Diplomatic Academy (Clingendael). His main research focus is on oil and gas sector governance in African countries. He is particularly interested in disputes between various actors (local, national, international) for the control of oil reserves as well as border disputes related to oil and gas fields. Benjamin Augé also studies the relations between Africa and a number of outside powers (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Cuba and Israel).

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the author.



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