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Political Briefing: *‘Increase in violence by the Islamic insurgency in Mozambique’s Cabo Delgado province’*

[11/03/2020][[1]](#footnote-1)

**Background**

The region of Cabo Delgado, in Northern Mozambique has experienced violence from radical Islamic extremism since October 2017, however, there has been a dramatic increase in the frequency of these attacks during the first months of 2020. Whilst recently, ISIL (ISIS) have claimed responsibility for the attacks, the group call themselves *‘Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama’ (ASW)* (See Aljazeera, 2020).

**Significance**

The recent developments are particularly concerning as not only has the frequency of the attacks increased, but they have also become more extreme in their nature. Indeed, local media reports have reported cases of beheadings, torture and kidnappings becoming increasingly used by the ASW militants (See Zitamar News, 2020). Furthermore, the ongoing violence has led to the displacement of 100,000 people and creating an internal refugee crisis (See UNHCR, 2020).

**Analysis**

An analysis of data compiled from ACLED shows the increase in violence over recent months (see figure 1). The most recent months have experienced the highest numbers of attacks carried out by ASW. Closer analysis shows that in the first two months of 2020, there were 40 attacks carried out by ASW in Cabo Delgado. By comparison, the same two-month date range for 2019 shows that only 16 attacks were carried out, representing a 150% increase from one year to the next.

**Figure1.**

(source: ACLED, 2020)

Academic research in this area (See Bonate, 2018; Louro, 2018 and Fagan, 2019) has suggested that one of the principal motivations behind ASW is to provide its members with economic opportunities, which have so lacked in this region of Mozambique where foreign investment has failed to filter down to the local population. Indeed, “government crackdowns on artisanal gem mining, relocation of some Mwani fisherman away from their traditional homes and the growing presence of foreigners drawn to the area by potential job opportunities have introduced economic stressors on the local population” (CSIS, 2019: 2). Furthermore, these stress factors have been further exacerbated over the last couple of years by natural disasters striking Mozambique and further destabilizing the area and its resources. In March 2019, tropical cyclone Idai struck Mozambique, whilst six weeks later, cyclone Kenneth made landfall in Northern Mozambique; cumulatively, these two cyclones left over 2 million people in need of humanitarian services (See UNICEF, 2019).

The security implications of the growing violence carried out by ASW are two-fold. Firstly, there is the local population that face ongoing violence and displacement. Secondly, there is a large presence of energy companies, such as Exxon Mobil Corp and Total, operating in the region due to Cabo Delgado having large liquid natural gas (LGN) reserves, which face growing security concerns. The government will be especially wary of the continued threat of ASW in Cabo Delgado due to the impacts this may have on foreign investment in the region. This is significant as it was economic hardship in the first place that was attributed to the growing violence, therefore any further economic weakness could further escalate the current issues.

With Mozambique’s own army struggling to deal with the threat, Maputo has turned to foreign mercenaries to begin engaging in Cabo Delgado. At the end of 2019, Russian private military group, *Wagner*, won a lucrative contract to provide added security in Mozambique. The Russian mercenaries won the contract ahead of ‘*OAM*’ and ‘*Black Hawk*’, two African-based private military contractors with “vast experience operating in Mozambique” (See Moscow Times, 2019). This raises questions over the preparedness of the foreign military contractors compared to using local private security firms with greater understanding of the surrounding environment. Furthermore, a recent New York Times (2020) report suggests that “at least seven Russian personnel have been killed in operations, American officials say, underscoring the risks facing troops for hire”. The opaque procurement processes not only raise questions over how the contracts are awarded, but in the case of Cabo Delgado and its unique geography, could even prove dangerous and counter-productive. It is worth highlighting that the physical geography of Cabo Delgado greatly favours the insurgents, who are able to use the forest as well as the sea as potential operating and escape routes.

**Forecast**

The Centre for Strategic International Studies (CSIS) convened a group of experts and academics on Mozambique in Washington DC in 2019 to discuss the likely scenarios and policy responses to the growing Islamic insurgency. The final summary report stated that dealing with the insurgency threat will depend on two factors: **insurgency capacity** and **government strategies to address the violence** (See CSIS, 2019).

A recent development that could change the course of action in the region, is the acknowledgement of the ongoing issue by the African Union (AU) during the 33rd summit meeting in Addis Ababa. This is significant as it is the first time since the outbreak of violence that the AU has actively engaged with the crisis. Despite this, in order to fully tackle the issue, *de jure* statements at AU summits will need to disseminate into *de facto* action and support in Cabo Delgado.

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1. These are the views of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the University of Leeds. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)