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Insurgency in Northern Mozambique: Nature and Responses

An armed Islamist insurgency in Mozambique—launched in 2017 with an attack on several police posts in Cabo Delgado province, in the country's north—has burgeoned. 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 have prompted the French energy firm 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.

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 by other names. In 2019, ASWJ reportedly pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS), which often claims and lauds the group's attacks and counts it as a member of its IS Central Africa Province (ISCAP), together with affiliates in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Somalia.

Figure 1. Cabo Delgado Province, Mozambique

Source: CRS.

Some observers have questioned the extent and import of ASWJ-IS ties, but U.N. global terrorism monitors and U.S. officials assert that operational links exist between them. In March 2021, the State Department, labeling ASWJ as ISIS-Mozambique, designated the group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, and also named as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist a Tanzanian whom officials identified as the group's leader. These actions ban material support to ASWJ and transactions between the group and U.S. persons, and freeze any U.S. property it may possess.

Tactics. Initially, ASWJ used simple bladed weapons and some guns, but since 2018, it has become increasingly well-armed and hit progressively more significant targets. ASWJ often attacks security force posts and convoys, state workers and facilities (e.g., schools and clinics), and civilian targets—notably road traffic and poor rural villages. Its fighters often loot and burn food and other property, and injure, kill, or kidnap residents, notably youths and women. The rationale for the group's attacks often is unclear, but some, notably a number involving mass beheadings—a notorious IS tactic—appear intended to punish perceived ASWJ foes, such as state workers and persons who resist ASWJ recruitment, including children, or whom ASWJ suspects of cooperating with authorities. ASWJ occasionally has warned civilians of impending attacks, limited arson to state or large business facilities, distributed looted food, and preached to locals on the group's religious precepts. Some reports indicate that different ASWJ cells may use disparate tactics and levels of violence, and that some attempt to indoctrinate abductees religiously. ASWJ has reportedly recruited by force and by offering payments to fighters; financing micro-entrepreneurs—whom the group then may also extort, demanding payments or in-kind support, such as surveillance of urban targets; and, in some cases, by aiding those seeking Islamic education abroad.

ASWJ's military prowess has grown since 2017; it has repeatedly executed complex operations (e.g., concurrent attacks on multiple targets, multi-pronged assaults on key towns, boat-based maritime assaults on local sea traffic and islands, and cross-border attacks into Tanzania). It undertakes espionage and seeks to infiltrate security forces and civilian populations, and some ASWJ fighters wear state military uniforms and use arms reportedly looted from state forces. ASWJ also reportedly uses drones and locally atypical weapons, suggesting it may have access to illicit arms trade networks. It also kidnaps for ransom and may receive funds and other aid from abroad, potentially including from other ISCAP affiliates.

ASWJ controls some territory, and has held the port town of Mocímboa da Praia since August 2020. In March 2021, it attacked Palma, a coastal town, after cutting road links to it, causing sharp food inflation and shortages. Prior attacks on Palma's outskirts may have been probing actions. The March attack resulted in mass fatalities, including multiple beheadings, and threatened a huge nearby natural gas processing plant being developed by a consortium led by Total. Many Palma residents seeking safety fled to the plant site, which ASWJ did not breach. The site is heavily protected by state security forces who remained embedded there while the insurgents overran Palma. After the attack, Total suspended the project and withdrew its staff, pending the state's reestablishment of security. State security forces reportedly looted Palma extensively after the attack.

Drivers. A confluence of local socioeconomic grievances and religious aims appear to motivate ASWJ, which seeks to supplant the secular state with Islamic Sharia law-based governance. Researchers, however, debate the relative strength, logic, and linkages between these and other factors in explaining the insurgency's evolution, as well as the extent to which ISIS or other foreign influences shape it.

A key source of 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 coastal villagers and its

transfer of their traditional lands to the Total gas project, the perceived low share of gas sector jobs given to locals, disruptions of local livelihoods, and the influence of foreign extractive industry actors also have driven tensions.

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, as have some security forces' human rights abuses and corruption in the context of counterterrorism operations. Some corruption in Cabo Delgado is reportedly tied to illicit trafficking in natural resources, persons, and illicit drugs, though the drug trade has moved south as insurgent violence has grown. This may suggest that to date ASWJ has mainly threatened trafficking activity, rather than exploited it—though ASWJ may be doing so covertly, as some analysts have warned.

Insurgency: Makeup and Origins

Arrests of alleged insurgents, eyewitness accounts, and other sources suggest that ASWJ is mostly made up of Cabo Delgado locals, including from the largely non-Muslim, inland Makonde ethnic group (historically supporters of the national majority political party, FRELIMO), and the coastal, Muslim Mwani, among others. Mwani often have backed RENAMO, the main opposition party and a former FRELIMO military foe. ASWJ members also reportedly include Tanzanians, other Mozambicans, and some fighters of various other nationalities.

ASWJ reportedly evolved from one or more dissident Muslim sects that rejected the authority of the state-vetted Islamic Council, a Wahhabi-oriented social welfare and representative body, in part due to the Council's FRELIMO links. Sect beliefs were influenced by East African Islamist preachers and their supporters, some of whom reportedly pursued anti-state attacks in Tanzania before fleeing to Cabo Delgado, the DRC, and elsewhere 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 had altercations with the Islamic Council and leaders of the locally predominant Sufi Muslim community. They also advocated for Sharia law-based governance—as the insurgents continue to do in their limited, ad hoc messaging (e.g., short social media videos), in which they also criticize the state and FRELIMO.

Humanitarian Situation and Responses. As of early June 2021, roughly 770,000 people had fled insurgency-linked violence in Cabo Delgado, including 90% of Palma's prior 75,000-person population. As of June 9, about 46% of internally displaced persons (IDPs) were children and about 93% of IDPs were living in host communities, mostly within Cabo Delgado, with the rest in temporary camps, according to the International Organization for Migration. Other IDPs remained in flight, often traveling by foot in isolated areas for safety reasons, as has been common after many past attacks. Tanzania has forcibly returned as many as 10,000 prospective refugees fleeing the violence thus far in 2021. U.N. agencies and other humanitarian actors have little or no access to the northeastern half of Cabo Delgado due to insecurity, bureaucratic hurdles, and noncooperation by officials. Thousands of IDPs have remained near the Total site in Palma. Security forces have reportedly extorted bribes from those seeking to flee by sea or air, and control much of the food supply into Palma, which they reportedly sell at high prices.

Where aid agencies have access, they are providing food, basic supplies, and, in some areas, psychosocial help for the many IDPs traumatized by exposure to severe violence. Food insecurity is widespread across the province, where violence and insecurity have damaged or forced 132 health facilities in the province (about a third) to close, leaving 1.2 million people in urgent need of health aid as of late May, U.N. agencies reported. As of mid-June 2021, 9% of a $254 million U.N.-wide humanitarian response plan centered on Cabo Delgado had been funded. U.S. humanitarian aid for Mozambique, including $78 million in FY2020, is partly allocated to Cabo Delgado.

Other Responses. Military-led counterinsurgency efforts, backed by paramilitary police and military contractors, have had mixed success. Key challenges have included low levels of public trust due to abuses by some security personnel, logistical gaps, and a limited capacity to concurrently protect key state-controlled sites and remote roads, promptly respond to ASWJ attacks, and take offensive action. The government, after initially expressing reservations about inviting direct foreign military intervention, has accepted foreign combat troops and trainers. In mid-July, the Southern African Development Community (SADC, which Mozambique currently chairs) began to deploy a regional intervention force to Cabo Delgado, though its mandate has not been publicly detailed. In early July, Rwanda (a non-SADC state), also deployed 1,000 combat troops to the province under a bilateral agreement. Days after deploying, these troops clashed with insurgents, reportedly killing 30. Meanwhile, U.S. Special Operations Forces have been training Mozambican marines. Portuguese paratroopers also are training local military forces and the European Union has approved a military training mission slated to deploy in September 2021.

Many observers contend that ending the insurgency would require programs to increase social cohesion and restore livelihoods and social services, followed by longer-term development investments. The government's nascent Northern Integrated Development Agency (ADIN) has developed a plan prioritizing such ends, which the World Bank is funding with a $100 million grant. The World Bank also has committed to provide up to $700 million under its Prevention and Resilience Allocation facility. One element of ADIN's plan, the relocation of up to 70,000 IDP families to 80 sites, could be complex and potentially contentious.

U.S. Interests and 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 $536 million in FY2021.

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