

Why Is Islamic State Attacking Mozambique?

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Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

اسلام کے تھیولوجی آف کاؤنٹر ٹیرورازم

The terrorist organization Islamic State (IS) seized the Palma region of Mozambique's Cabo Delgado district in late March 2021. The organization, which first took over the city of Mocimbao da Praia in the area where the clashes started on October 5, 2017, headed north after capturing the islands in the region. The organization's presence in the region is based on the Ansar al Sunna, which was founded in 2015. The militias, followers of Aboud Rogo Mohammed's jihadist movement in Kenya, crossed into Mozambique from Kenya. The Ansar Al Sunna movement argues that sharia should prevail in Mozambique. The movement, which began to organize into Macomia, Montepuez and Mocimbao da Praia, continued to gain strength over time.

The organization is also considered to act in partnership with the Al-Shabaab organization, which is linked to al-Qaeda. As it is known, Al-Shabaab is particularly influential in Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania. It is known that former Mozambique soldiers and policemen who participated in the organization helped the organization to train militants. According to a Reuters report, the organization had 6 leaders in Cabo Delgado alone. It is possible to talk about a terrorist organization that was not organized in these years but organized in a cellular way. According to the article by researcher Sunguta West. (1)

The organization derived funding from heroin smuggling, other types of smuggling and the ivory trade. IS finds fertile ground for recruitment because there are economic, political and social problems in the country where youth unemployment is intense. What the organization promised to its militants was that an equal economy in the world, as well as in heaven, would be created by the Sharia and the IS caliphate will flourish. The organization carried out its first action on October 5, 2017 in Mocimboa da Praia, which is now in the hands of IS. While the organization was carrying out the attacks, it was also advising the local people to rebel against the state, not to pay their taxes and not accept the corrupt education system, just like IS did in Iraq and Syria.

When the Mozambique security forces responded harshly to the organization's actions, clashes became inevitable. Violence peaked between October, November and December of 2017.

In addition to the attacks of the organization, the non-discrimination of civilians in the operations carried out by the security forces further exacerbated the fire. (2) By the spring of 2018, it was a turning point for the region. A Mozambican journalist writing for All Africa claimed that 90 “well trained ISIS fighters” had infiltrated the north of the country in the previous month and had made their way to the port of Nacala. (3) Although the Mozambique government denied the incident, over time it turned out that denial turned out to be untrue. About a month after the incident, after the African Union announced that IS militants might be involved in the clashes, the threat of the "regional caliphate" began to emerge. The magnitude of the threat was also demonstrated by the US Embassy warning its citizens living in Palma. In June 2018, the Washington administration ordered its citizens living in Palma to leave the area.

Throughout 2018, attacks and beheadings made for "booty" increased in the region. The influence of IS in the region was felt. Whether the militants were sent to Mozambique via Iraq or Syria is a mystery, the organization's success in its actions raised its suspicion of the existence of a professional staff. After security forces captured a Ugandan organization leader in early 2019, it became clear that the fighters in Mozambique were not just Mozambican or Kenyan. (4) It was evident that ISIL wants an action that fits the global caliphate project. On June 4, 2019, IS's Central African Province (ISCAP) claimed responsibility for an attack for the first time in the region. The threat, previously strongly suspected, has become official. (5) Just as in the Philippines, Afghanistan, Libya and Nigeria, miles away from the center of the organization. October of 2019 is another milestone for the region.

This is the period when Wagner, a paramilitary group affiliated with Russia, participated in operations against IS along with the Mozambique army. Operations throughout Cabo Delgado were successful in the first place, and the militants retreated to reorganize in the wooded areas, leaving the village and town centers. But before long, IS launched new attacks in the region, killing 7 Wagner members and 20 Mozambique soldiers. (6)

On March 23, 2020, Mocimbao de Praia came under IS control. Following the attack organized by sea and land, it was aimed to show sympathy for the organization by paying attention not to kill civilians. While the organization was trying to gather sympathy by distributing food to the people in this city, it spread fear by continuing its bloody raids and mass murders in other regions. One year after the organization claimed responsibility for the attacks in the region, the Mozambique government accepted the presence of IS in the region. The purpose of not being accepted in the first place may be a tactic to not show the world that there is a security weakness. At the same time, the government's acceptance of the organization's presence in the region came after its successful operations against the organization, especially on the islands.

The organization, which took over Mocímboa da Praia in March, was withdrawn after a day's control. ISCAP made another similar initiative in August and was withdrawn again. But the large scale attack on August 11, 2020 was a complete disaster. The organization took over the city and killed around 1000 Mozambique soldiers. Seeing that Wagner was unsuccessful, the Mozambique government started to seek help from the European Union as well. (7) The European Union answered the call 1 month later and announced that it would assist the Mozambique government in the fight against IS. (8) The capture of 12 Iraqi organization members in the operation against IS in November 2020 can be regarded as evidence of the organization's changing strategy.

It is known that American officials also support the Mozambique government in the fight against terrorism. Until March 24, 2021, many regions changed hands, especially in Cabo Delgado. Sometimes IS captured areas and sometimes government forces took them back. Many people lost their lives. On March 24, IS took over the Palma region and increased its overall gains in the region. So why is IS attacking this region? The first answer is that IS could not regain power in Iraq and Syria, especially due to the USA, Russia and Coalition countries. For this reason, the IS leadership changes its strategy and operates in areas where the authority is weaker within the scope of the "global caliphate".

This is the main reason for declaring provinces in countries such as Mozambique, Nigeria, Libya, Egypt, Chad, Mali, Somalia, Afghanistan, Philippines and Yemen. The second reason is natural resources. It is known that the Cabo Delgado region is very rich in terms of natural gas deposits. Having experience of earning money from oil smuggling in Iraq and Syria, IS wants to survive economically by seizing natural gas deposits. The third reason is that economic and social problems in these regions means potentially easy recruitment by the organization. Since IS knows this situation well, it promises to provide prosperity and ultimate victory to its militants. At the same time, especially Cabo Delgado and the surrounding islands are considered to be most suitable for trade. Smuggling through port areas is easily achievable. Another reason is to use the conflict area to try to lure in US troops, the main enemy of the organization. We will have to wait and see if the IS caliphate spreads in the African region, what action will the US-led Coalition and other countries take?

ITCT does not necessarily endorse any or all views expressed by the author in the article.

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