

Countering Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jamo (Al - Shabaab) Insurgency in Mozambique

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STRUCTURE & MODUS OPERANDI

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Executive Summary

By investigating the factors that contribute to and the risks posed by the series of armed insurgent attacks by Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jamo (ASWJ), also locally known as Ansar al-Sunna and **Al-Shabaab**, since October 2017 in the Cabo Delgado Province of Mozambique, this report aims to discuss the context and propose ideas for effective counter-insurgency measures with a minimally intrusive military footprint.

Since Q3 2017, and up to early December 2018, analysts have recorded 51 attacks that appear to be growing in intensity and lethality, despite the arrest of almost 500 suspects.¹ The group's activities pose a potentially devastating threat to the promise of lucrative on- and off-shore gas exploration and extraction operations by multinational corporations such as Anadarko and ExxonMobil, in addition to terrorizing local populations.

The suggestions focus on installing a small specialized military presence, intelligence gathering capabilities, multi-party liaisons, anti-smuggling operations, and cross-border cooperation to curtail the ability of ASWJ to terrorize civilians, imprint their radical Islam ideology and conduct organized crime activities.

Background and History of the Group:

Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jamo/Ansar al-Sunna (Shabaab), from here on referred to as ASWJ, is an Islamic militant group formed in 2015 and primarily active in the Cabo Delgado province of Mozambique. According to local sources, the two most prominent leaders were Nur Adremane and Jafar Alawi, both from Mocimboa da Praia.² Not a lot is known about the two men, but sources believe that they were influenced by followers of the radical Kenyan cleric Aboud Rogo who was linked to the 1998 US embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam and accused of being a financier for al-Shabaab in Somalia before assassinated in Mombasa in 2012.³

Origins and Composition:

¹Pirio, Gregory; Pittelli, Robert; and Adam, Yussuf. "The Emergence of Violent Extremism in Northern Mozambique." *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, March 25, 2018. Accessed on December 12, 2018. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/the-emergence-of-violent-extremism-in-northern-mozambique/>

²Opperman, Jasmine. "Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jamo/Ansar al-Sunna (Shabaab) – Mozambique." *Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism*, 2018. Accessed on December 10, 2018. http://www.itct.org.uk/archives/itct_terrorist_net/ahlu-sunnah-wa-jamo-ansar-al-sunna-shabaab-mozambique

³West, Sunguta. "Ansar al-Sunna: A New Militant Islamist Group Emerges in Mozambique." *Terrorism Monitor*, vol 16 issue 12 (2018): 5-7.

After his death, a group of followers migrated south, eventually crossing the Tanzanian border into Mozambique where they attracted young men in the socioeconomically disadvantaged region of Cabo Delgado. With Adremane and Alawi, they frequented local mosques and encouraged youths to leave the government schools and accept “scholarships” to attend madrassas in countries like Sudan and Saudi Arabia where they were radicalized. The group also offered poor and unemployed local people money to participate in the attacks. Members are typically between 20- and 35-years-old and from the Mocimboa da Praia, and nearby districts of Palma, Nangade, and Macomia. The majority of the group are from the Kimwani tribe, an ethnic group that has been socially and economically marginalized, many surviving by informal and illegal trading. Most members speak Portuguese, Kimwane, and Swahili, and, apart from the language barrier, are distrustful of the local police and military, who mostly come from Maputo and different ethnicity. A sizeable number of fighters are from Tanzania, Somalia, and the Great Lakes region, who have migrated in search of better opportunities.

Ideology:

ASWJ wants to replace government institutions with Sharia-based structures to establish an Islamic State. They reject national and Christian symbols and refuse to negotiate with the Mozambican government. They distinguish themselves by wearing white head turbans, shaving their heads, growing their beards, and wear black pants or robes that are cut off just below the knees. Over time, the group became more radical and formed hidden camps in the area, where members received military training from ex-police and border officers, as well as al-Shabaab fighters from Somalia, Kenya, and Tanzania. Some members also traveled abroad to train at facilities operated by al-Shabaab.

Due to their parallel involvement in criminal activities and ideological pursuits, the question is whether these loosely organized groups should be classified (and treated) as terrorists or as criminal thugs, a distinction that is important to develop a proportionate and effective response. Indications are that their main grievance is economical and cultural marginalization by the Frelimo-controlled

government and their business partners. In the process, radical Islam may be used, at least in part, as a pretext to gain following in the pursuit of economic and political emancipation.⁴

Somewhat resembling the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the ASWJ resent the exploitation of local resources by foreign conglomerates that remind them of the colonial period. Large multinational companies like ExxonMobil and Anadarko have built production facilities in the area, with little benefit to the local population. Most jobs are filled by expatriates from South Africa and elsewhere, while thousands of people have been involuntarily resettled to make the on-shore area available for Anadarko's Area 1 gas development construction.⁵ Survival based on the terror-crime nexus is also typical of militant groups functioning in sub-Saharan Africa, including the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) that uses terror campaigns in part to protect their criminal networks.

Grievances, group identity, and unsophisticated criminal enterprises to support their livelihood and limited military supplies are all common characteristics of the pre-insurgency stage of the life cycle of an insurgency.⁶ Although religious ideas of the group and leader play an important role of people to join an insurgent movement, government action, regional developments, and unemployment finally motivates active participation in almost 90% of recruits.⁷ Most join through connections with friends (50%), a religious figure (17%), or family member (8%).⁸ Furthermore, around 80% of individuals recruited by a violent extremist group in Africa have an acute sense of grievance toward government and a especially high distrust of the police, military, and politicians and although more than half identify religion as a main reason for joining the group, almost two-thirds report never reading or understanding religious texts.⁹

⁴Guilengue, Fredson G. "Three layers of uncertainty in Mozambique." Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southern Africa. *International Politics*, Issue 05/2016. Accessed on December 10, 2018. <https://www.rosalux.de/publikation/id/38966/three-layers-of-uncertainty-in-mozambique/>

⁵Anadarko. "Resettlement Plan Draft for Public Disclosure: Mozambique Gas Development Project." Document No. EA-MZ-SR0000-RRG-U14-00006-27, November 25, 2015.

⁶U.S. Government. "Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency," 2012. Accessed on December 12, 2012. Retrieved from <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=713599>

⁷ United Nations Development Program. "Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment," 2012. Accessed on December 12, 2018. Retrieved from <http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/>

⁸Ibid. p. 75.

⁹Ibid. p. 82.

Structure and Modus Operandi:

Although some leaders have been identified by local sources and police, the group is not unified and appeared to be split into as much as 20 cells, with around 20 male members each. The cells are not coordinated and execute low-tech attacks with machetes and a few handguns and AK-47's. Incidents appear to be random in timing and locale, partly driven by revenge against opposition from village elders and clerics and looting of property. Male fighters enter the village first, kill or drive those who resist out before sending female companions to gather belongings and then setting structures alight.

Funding:

The ASWJ survives by looting, illegal ivory trade, heroin trafficking, and selling contraband.¹⁰ To date, there has been no indication of external funding, although there is some speculation about an informal connection with Somalian-based al-Shabaab and that oil producers like Saudi Arabia have an incentive to delay mining of the sizeable gas fields alongside the coast of Cabo Delgado that will make Mozambique the third largest exporter of liquified natural gas (LNG) worldwide.

Geographical Distribution of Attacks

The first attack attributed to the group was in Mocimboa da Praia, a port town in the northern part of Cabo Delgado Province, on October 5, 2017, when an armed group of about 30 to 40 men attacked three police stations at dawn, including the district command post, and started a siege that lasted 48 hours and left two police officers and 14 attackers dead, with five more policemen injured.¹¹ Police made 52 arrests in the following week, and some detainees claimed that they were promised 2,500 meticaís (40 dollars) to participate.¹² Up to November 30, 2018, and including this incident, the ACLED database listed 51 attacks against civilians and battles and skirmishes between the ASWJ and government police and military forces.¹³ There were fatalities in 36 of these events, totaling 146. The attacks appear to

¹⁰Fabricius, Peter. "Mozambique's Apparent Islamist Insurgency Poses Multiple Threats." *Institute for Security Studies*, November 20, 2018. Accessed on December 12, 2018. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/mozambiques-apparent-islamist-insurgency-poses-multiple-threats>

¹¹Fabricius, Peter. "Is Another Boko Haram or al-Shabaab Erupting in Mozambique?" *Institute for Security Studies*, June 14, 2018. Accessed on December 12, 2018. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/is-another-boko-haram-or-al-shabaab-erupting-in-mozambique>

¹²Frey, Adrian. "Police in Control of Mocimboa da Praia – AIM Report." *Club of Mozambique*, October 8, 2017. Accessed on December 13, 2018. <https://clubofmozambique.com/news/police-in-control-of-mocimboa-da-praia-aim-report/>

¹³The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). Accessed December 10, 2018.

<https://www.acledata.com/dashboard/>

become more brazen and violent, with two of the most recent incidents on November 23 in Chicuia Velha village, Nangade district and September 20 in Piquewe village, Macomia district, resulting in the deaths of 12 and 14 civilians respectively.

Geographically, the attacks started in Mocimboa da Praia; subsequent attacks were concentrated to the south, staying alongside the coast toward Pangane and Quisanga. The next group of attacks primarily took place north of Mocimboa da Praia, all the way to Palma, which is where the on-shore Area 1 facility of Anadarko is situated. As a result, employees were prohibited from leaving the compound for a period. After that, the later attacks moved inland to the Nangade district.

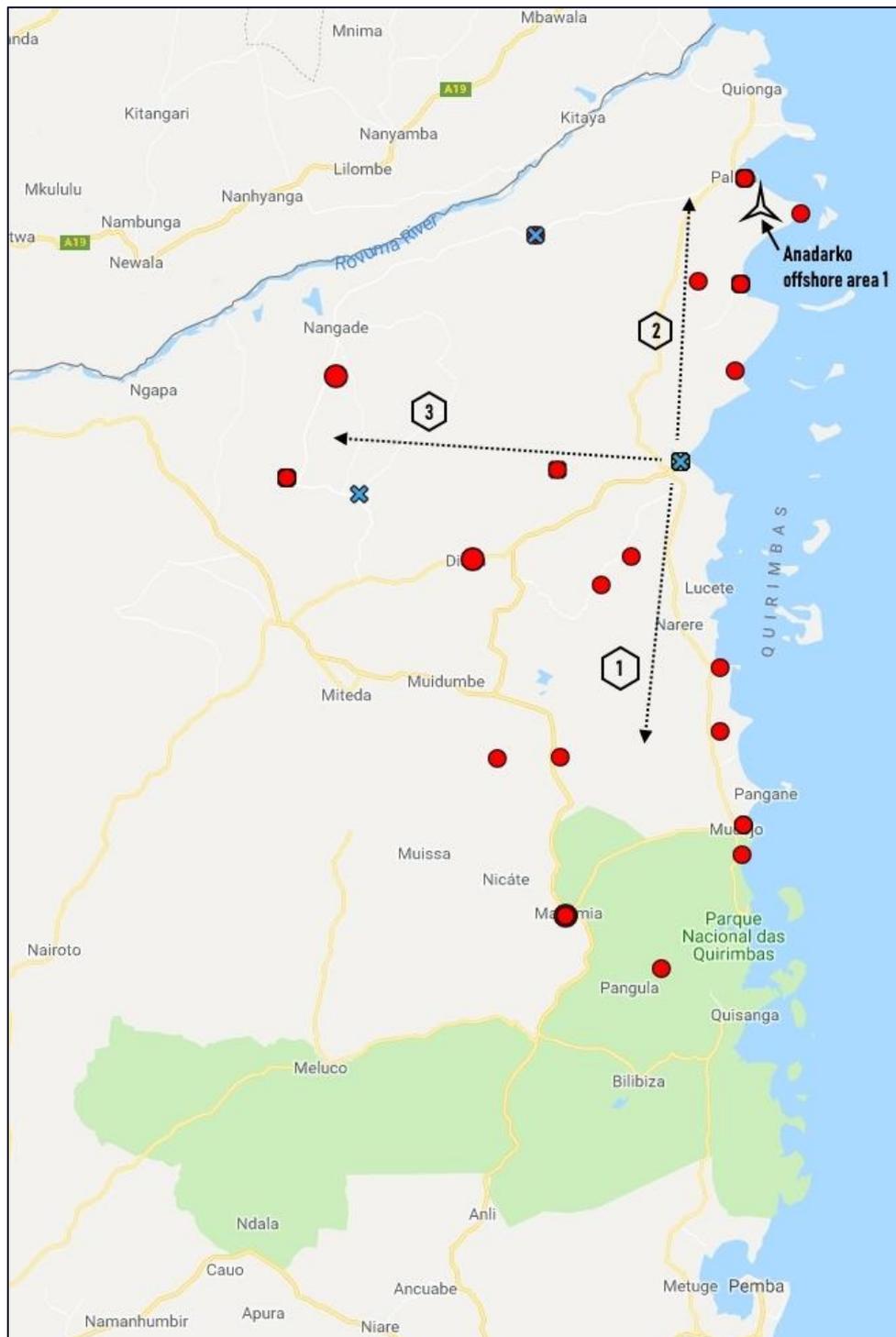


Figure 1: *Geographical Distribution of Attacks* (source: Joan Swart, Google Maps)

Although it is believed that several uncoordinated groups are committing the attacks in different regions, it is possible that some the same ringleaders are moving to new areas when the pressure from law enforcement increases, attracting young local men there to join. For instance, on December 10, a 30-year-old man, Mustafa Suale Machinga, suspected of leading the recent attacks in the Nangade area was arrested with the help of the local community. He is ex-military with a 12th-grade education obtained at a school in Mocimbao da Praia.¹⁴ Locals believed that he recruited about 50 young boys from the area to join his group.

Timeline of Attacks:

Referring to Figure 2, after the first siege in Mocimbao da Praia, the attacks stayed relatively small regarding damage and loss of life and less frequent than recently. The first attack to claim more than ten civilian lives occurred on April 15, 2018, in Diaca Velha, close to the border with the Nangade district when insurgents attacked the village and stole food. The use of violence appears to increase in attacks immediately after skirmishes with and raids of police and military forces. Where nine events were registered in the last three months of 2017, and 11 from January to April 2018, the intensity and frequency increased significantly thereafter, with 23 attacks in May and June 2018, again grouped around several battles with local police units in the regions of Nangade and Palma. It is also from around this time that the destruction of property escalated. Attackers burned almost 600 homes and structures down in attacks during June to November 2018.

¹⁴All Africa. "Mozambique: Alleged Leader of Nangade Insurgents Captured." *Agencia de Informacao de Mocambique*. Accessed on December 10, 2018. <https://allafrica.com/stories/201812110032.html>

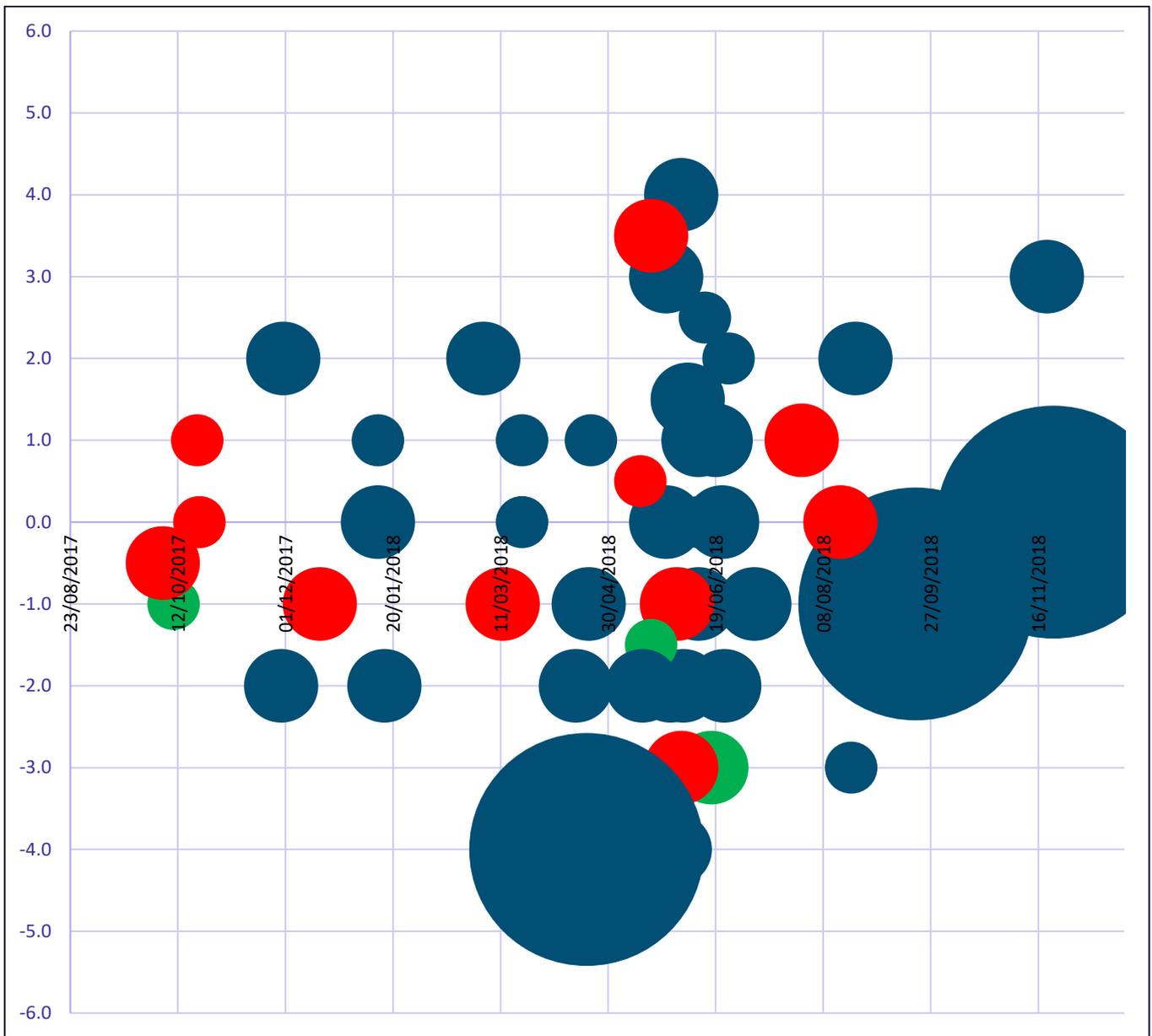
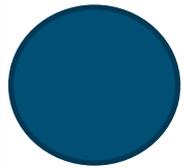


Figure 2: Timeline of Attacks (source: Joan Swart, Excel)

Legend	Meaning
	No fatalities – civilian attack
	One to nine fatalities – civilian attack
	Ten or more fatalities – civilian attack
	Battle with police or military
	Arrests or surrenders

Another noticeable pattern is an increase in the level of violence in the latest spate of incidents that took place from September 2018 to date. On May 27, 2018, 10 people were beheaded in the cities of Olumbi and Monjane, near Palma, during the night of June 4, 2018, seven civilians were decapitated with machetes and 164 houses torched,¹⁵ while, on September 20, 2018, 14 villagers were killed in Piquewe, Macomia district and 55 homes burned down.¹⁶ Therefore, regarding the timeline, despite a lull in attacks in August and September, ASWJ has resumed their activities, more brazen and violent than before.

Key Issues and Environmental Factors:

Although much of the local and regional reporting focus on a single narrative context, the driving forces behind the formation and growth of ASWJ are much more complex, involving socioeconomic grievances and external influences.

- **Socioeconomic Cleavage.** Compared to Maputo, the economic center of Mozambique, Cabo Delgado is a poor province with high unemployment. Communities feel excluded from economic and political participation, which is exacerbated by the settlement of large multinational oil and gas companies in the region without visible benefit to the local people.
- **Cultural Factors.** The 2.3-million-strong population of Cabo Delgado is made up of different ethnic groups, including the Makwa, Makonde, and Mwini. In addition to cultural and linguistic differences, there remains a north versus south historical friction between the Frelimo and Renamo movements, which causes further division with the government and military based (and manned) from the south.
- **Cross-Border Influences.** Fighters, contraband, and weapons crossing the porous 800 km border between Tanzania and Mozambique is a problem and although there are only two official border crossings – the unity bridge at Negomano and a ferry at Namoto – the Ruvuma River can be crossed illegally by boat elsewhere or by bribing officials. Many of the more experienced fighters of ASWJ are believed to come from Tanzania and further north.

¹⁵ AFP. "Seven Hacked to Death by Suspected Jihadists in Mozambique." *The Citizen*. Accessed on December 10, 2018. <https://citizen.co.za/news/news-world/1946323/seven-hacked-to-death-by-suspected-jihadists-in-mozambique/>

¹⁶ AFP. "12 Killed as Jihadists Attack Village in North Mozambique." *Daily Mail*. Accessed on December 10, 2018. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-6193313/12-killed-jihadists-attack-village-north-Mozambique.html>



- **Crime-Grievance Nexus.** Named East Africa's heroin coast, drugs and other contraband (e.g., ivory, timber, and rubies) come in by sea or land across the Tanzania-Mozambique border, mainly on the way to Maputo and South Africa. Police and government officials are often involved, and crime lords lure young unemployed men into their networks with monetary incentives, thereby enabling extremists to move and operate freely.¹⁷
- **Geographical Factors.** Cabo Delgado Province is divided into 16 districts. At 24.7 persons per square kilometer, the province of Cabo Delgado is the 4th least populated of the ten provinces.¹⁸ The largely uninhabited landscape is characterized by wetlands, undulating hills and ridges, and flat-bottomed valleys, speckled with small villages and settlements. Cabo Delgado has a tropical savanna climate with a wet season from October to March. Combined, these factors make reconnaissance challenging.
- **Role of Foreign Business.** The combination of wealthy multinational corporations settling into areas where communities are disadvantaged, corrupt government officials, and enjoying no benefits of the developments increase the grievance of the local population.

Threat Assessment:

The insurgent attacks by ASWJ are growing in intensity and frequency and pose a severe threat to social stability and economic growth potential in the region and country as a whole.

1. Using low-tech attacks until now (e.g., machetes, arson, and a few AK-47s), the military capability of ASWJ remains low but can be increased unexpectedly with external funding and resources. There is a high risk that the group will be hijacked by a larger, well-established group, most likely the Islamic State or al-Shabaab, both of whom already have a presence in Mozambique and some connection to ASJW, although still tenuous.¹⁹
2. The presence of foreign PMC's is equally concerning. According to multiple sources, Erik Prince's Frontier Services Group (FSG) and PMC Wagner have already set up base in the

¹⁷ Hanlon, Joseph. "How Mozambique's Smuggling Barons Nurtured Jihadists." *BBC News*. Accessed on December 12, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-44320531>

¹⁸ Geo-Ref.net data. Accessed on December 7, 2018 at <http://www.geo-ref.net/en/moz.htm>

¹⁹ European Institute of Peace [EIP]. "*The Islamic State in East Africa*." Brussels, Belgium: EIP, 2018.



country, tendering for a government military contract. Their involvement will most likely escalate the fragile situation and encourage an intractable conflict.

3. Although the ASWJ has operated under the guise of wanting to establish an Islamic Caliphate based on Sharia law, socioeconomic grievances play an important role, especially in attracting followers.
4. The Mozambique government is vulnerable as it is considered a fragile state, basically under guardianship of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank and relies heavily on the prospect of future wealth obtained from foreign investments to extract the natural gas reserves in Cabo Delgado that will make the country the third largest exporter of LNG worldwide.
5. The Mozambican defense budget is low and shrinking. The country does not have much counterterrorism and anti-insurgency capability, both in expertise and equipment. The temptation to get outside help is great, but the risk that the external (mercenary) forces will become entrenched is equally high, thereby increasing the pushback already made against the cultural makeup and reported humans' rights abuses of the government forces.
6. The insurgency is at a point where escalation in terms of external influences, resources and funding, revenge, and ideological and other aspirations will not be unexpected. To date, foreign interests have not been targeted, but in such a scenario, kidnappings of foreign nationals and attacks on foreign installations and interests are very likely.

With immediate and swift action, most risks can be mitigated. A delay in action or escalation by the government will likely have dire and preventable consequences.

Options and Recommendations:

The recommended options address the threat of violent attacks by military intervention, but, more importantly, concurrently involve intelligence gathering, coordinated plans with cross-border agencies, and engagement with stakeholders in the community, government, and business. Such an approach covers all the bases of the COIN strategy, a comprehensive guide to counterinsurgency developed by the United

States Government, which proposes an approach that blends military, humanitarian, economic, and political responses to sustainably resolve an insurgency.²⁰

1. Establish a central military command post at the Mocimboa da Praia airfield and two intelligence outposts at the government offices in Palma and Nangade towns, forming a radius of approximately 100 km. Unity command of a central agency is vital in complex and fluid military situations. The central command should have two to three specialized strike units and support personnel totaling about 50. Two intelligence officers able to mingle and converse with the local population should be based at each outpost. The central command should be equipped with a few fixed-wing ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) aircraft supporting at least two medium and two light utility helicopters, possibly backed by a surveillance drone and high-tech radar, all of which are part of the current capability of the Mozambique Defense Force.
2. Use the intelligence capability at the command center and outposts, liaisons with community representatives, and other sources to identify and target ringleaders for the group. Also, good intelligence should inform of imminent attacks, how the insurgents are supplied, where they keep their weapons, and how they recruit.²¹
3. Appoint a multi-party liaison committee with representatives from private business, community leaders, and government to assess risks and discuss interventions on a monthly basis.
4. Identify at-risk targets of strategic and economic value and develop plans with stakeholders to safeguard it, including tourist-frequented places, military, police, and government installations, and business infrastructure, focusing on the north-eastern areas of Cabo Delgado.
5. Set up a cross-border cooperation plan with Tanzanian authorities to share intelligence and coordinate anti-smuggling and counter illegal migration across the porous Tanzania-Mozambique border.

²⁰Bureau of Political-Military Affairs. "U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide." Washington, DC: Department of State, U.S. Government, January 2009.

²¹Reamer, Kevin. "The Importance of Intelligence in Combating a Modern Insurgency." *Journal of Strategic Security*, vol 2 issue 2: 73-90. doi:10.5038/1944-0472.2.2.3

6. Investigate the viability of skills development and employment creation among youths in the affected areas.
7. Identify and provide for the most immediate needs of humanitarian relief and essential services in the affected and at-risk communities, focusing on the districts of Palma, Mocimboa da Praia, and Nangade. A well-designed and -executed aid strategy effectively support “accurate and effective military operations.”²²
8. Government and the prosecuting agency have to demonstrate the commitment to initiate disciplinary action and prosecution against any known acts of bribery and corruption.

These recommendations are designed to manage the threat of violence with proportional military responses, while engaging in non-military engagements to improve the conditions on the ground, especially for the unemployed youths who are the targets of the insurgent ringleaders.

Risk of the Options:

The risks of the options could be contained if the focus is on the development and inclusion of local communities as much as is possible and military action is used proportionately (minimally, as required to contain an imminent attack). The risk is that excessive force used by military personnel, which, as has already happened, typically causes an intensified response, including alienation of already disadvantaged youths in the communities. Involvement of external forces is also very likely to escalate the violence. Another risk is that diplomatic and development options take time to show results, which may further frustrate local people. The organized crime component also involves multiple and deep layers of society and authorities and will be difficult to curtail.

Conclusion:

This report recommends community and private business engagement, skills development, and employment creation actions supported by proportionate military interventions in the Cabo Delgado Province of Mozambique to counter and curtail the ongoing violence perpetrated by the Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jamo (ASWJ) insurgents. Inclusivity of local communities should take preference in engagement

²²Pechenkina, Anna O., and Bennett, D. Scott. “Violent and Non-Violent Strategies of Counterinsurgency.” *Journal of Artificial Societies and Social Simulation*, vol 20 issue 4: 1-25. doi:10.18564/jasss.3540

plans while preventing foreign private military contractors from playing a role. A heavy-handed military approach runs a significant risk of blowback, increasingly violent reprisal attacks, and attracting funding and assimilation by larger, better organized and equipped insurgent groups like al-Shabaab from Somalia and the Islamic State.

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ABOUT ITCT

ITCT is UK based organisation and founded in 2018. It is a non-political and non-profitable organisation and is a unique think tank in itself. There is not a single organisation around that specifically counters the narratives of Islamist terrorism by using the tools of Islamic Theology. ITCT exposes the root causes of Political Islam and works hard to eliminate it through introducing the actual concept of Islamic Theology.

ITCT conducts a comprehensive research to find out the key elements that draw the most vulnerable people of the society into the fire of religious extremism. ITCT works on three main factors in order to educate the Muslim community:

- That Islamist Terrorism is wrongly associated with Islam
- And is committed by misguided Muslims
- By manipulating religious texts to brainwash Muslims

ITCT has three pillars to stand on:

- **MISSION**

Countering Islamist Terrorism

- **VISION**

Educating Muslim Community

- **OBJECTIVE**

Providing the Solution of Islamist Terrorism

ITCT is an independent organisation that generates funds through donations. ITCT warmly welcomes talented writers, researchers and experts and would like to publish their work.