



## A New Jihadist Front in Mozambique

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In August, ISIS-linked Muslim rebels in Mozambique seized the strategic port of Mocímboa da Praia, located near gas installations in the Cabo Delgado province. The extremist offensive may spoil development opportunities in a country that is one of Poland's main trading partners in Africa.

Mozambique, a Portuguese colony until 1975, is one of the poorest countries in the world. The mostly Christian state is inhabited by about 20% Muslims, a minority that formed from the 8<sup>th</sup> century as a result of Arab, Persian, and Swahili expansions. In the 1960s and 1970s, the left-wing FRELIMO movement led the struggle for independence from Portugal. It is still the dominant political grouping (in 2019, its leader Filipe Nyusi was elected president for a second term). From 1977 to 1992, a civil war raged between the Soviet-backed FRELIMO and the apartheid South Africa-backed RENAMO militias, today the main opposition party. RENAMO's return to armed struggle in 2013-2019, as well as the cyclones that hit Mozambique in 2016 and 2019, kept the regional focus away from the growing Islamist insurgency in its northern periphery.

**Rebellion in Cabo Delgado.** In the Mozambican province of Cabo Delgado bordering Tanzania, Muslims make up almost 60% of the population. Its indigenous people are culturally close to that of East Africa. During the independence war, some local ethnic groups, such as the Mwani, supported the Portuguese against FRELIMO, for which they were discriminated against in the independent Mozambique. Organised crime has flourished in the economically marginalised region, for example, along a heroin smuggling route from Asia to South Africa. Against the background of these problems, the radical idea of separation from the state with the region's own religious schools, mosques, etc., gained popularity among Muslims. The local Ansar al-Sunna group, supplied with extremists from Kenya and Tanzania, launched armed attacks on soldiers, policemen, and officials in 2017, mostly with machetes. Due to a government blockade of the province and the lack of reliable information from the area, the structure, leadership, or exact goals of the

movement are still unknown. Since mid-2019—possibly with outside support and money from crime—the attackers have been using modern weapons, their actions are well-coordinated, and Mozambique's army is on the defensive. On 11 August, the extremists captured and have since held the port city of Mocímboa da Praia, which has a population of 30,000. So far across the region, about 1,500 people have died in the conflict and 250,000 have fled their homes. Since July 2019, the group ISIS Central African Province has taken credit for the attacks in Mozambique. However, the scale of the international ISIS network's impact on developments in Mozambique is debatable. The core of the rebel forces is the local Mwani, who know the difficult, sparsely populated area.

**Natural Resources and Conflict.** One source of conflict has been the frustration of the province's inhabitants with the lack of development despite its rich natural resources. In 2010, natural gas reserves estimated at almost 3 trillion m<sup>3</sup>, the largest on the continent after Nigeria and Algeria, were discovered in the Rovuma Basin off the northern coast of Mozambique. This attracted international majors. On the Afungi peninsula in Cabo Delgado, three large infrastructure projects are underway to liquefy gas from these fields: the Mozambique LNG Project (Total, worth \$20 billion), Rovuma LNG Project (ExxonMobil, ENI, CNPC; worth \$30 billion), and Coral FLNG Project (ENI and ExxonMobil; \$4.7 billion). Also on the peninsula, Japan's Mitsui OSK Lines and the Turkish Karpowership are planning to build a partially floating LNG power plant. South Africa, suffering from a shortage of energy sources is planning to build a 2,450-km pipeline from Cabo Delgado. It would also supply gas to the main cities of Mozambique. The effects of developing investments that would, according to the Mozambique authorities, make the

country one of the largest LNG exporters, include the displacement of inhabitants, loss of access to fisheries, and threats to the unique biosphere of the Quirimbas archipelago.

The gas infrastructure is protected mainly by private companies (American, British, French, Canadian, South African) established by former military personnel, commissioned by investors. It is also a priority for the Mozambican authorities. As a result, the forces directed to fight the Islamists are weakened—for example, the defenders of the attacked Mocimboa da Praia ran out of ammunition. Although there have been no attempts to strike on the Afungi peninsula (e.g., on labour camps, the airport, existing infrastructure), gas firms' supply personnel fall victim to attacks in the province. The escalation of the conflict causes concern for foreign corporations but has not stopped the investments. In July, Total secured financing of most of its projects and pledged to launch LNG exports from 2024 (13.1 million tonnes per year, possibly expanded to 43 million tonnes).

**Internationalisation of the Conflict.** The growing visibility of ISIS and the threat to investment has increased other countries' interest in the conflict. The U.S. State Department pledged to strengthen anti-drug cooperation with Mozambique, pointing to links between smugglers and extremists. France seeks establishment of its military naval mission in Mozambique. Formally, it would counteract the expansion of jihadists; in practice also secure investments in sea deposits. Tanzania has deployed troops in regions bordering Mozambique and has announced an offensive against rebel bases on its side of the border. South African authorities are considering sending a force to Cabo Delgado. On 3 July, ISIS, in its *Al-Naba* propaganda magazine, threatened attacks inside South Africa should the country decide to intervene. In response, the South African authorities are trying to neutralise local ISIS cells, which they believe support the insurgency logistically and financially. Extremists extended similar threats against the Southern African Development Community (SADC), whose leaders discussed Mozambique at their 17 August summit, but did not decide on a regional intervention. In the past, the organisation sent troops to member states mired in crises, such as the DR Congo in 1998–1999 or Lesotho in 1998. Private forces play a key role in the fight against the extremists. A number of private military companies sought to support the Mozambique army against the jihadists. After President Nyusi's visit to Moscow on 22 August 2019, a

contract was awarded to Wagner Group, a Russian private military company. However, the contingent of about 200 soldiers who arrived the following month turned out to be unprepared—the Russians were unable to work with the Mozambican army, their drones were useless in the dense forest, and in October at least seven Wagner military contractors were killed in ambushes (some of them also decapitated). Soon, their place on the front was taken by the Dyck Advisory Group (DAG) of Rhodesian / Zimbabwean veterans who fought in Mozambique against RENAMO in the 1980s. In April, DAG combat helicopters defended the provincial capital, Pemba, from attack by Islamists.

**Prospects.** Mozambican Islamists are changing tactics—they are no longer limited to guerrilla attacks but will seek to create a territorial administration in the province, like Al-Shabaab in Somalia. The interests of global powers and the problems of the Muslim population of the province make the conflict attractive in terms of propaganda for ISIS, for which Africa has become an important area of expansion after the loss of territory in Syria and Iraq. The brutality of the army will increase local support for the rebellion. The international jihadist network eyes attacks on gas infrastructure, i.e., American or French, on land and at sea. The Mozambican authorities, for whom the paralysis of investment would mean the loss of the prospect of doubling GDP and significant budget revenues, will seek external support. The Wagner failure will encourage the company to choose partners with more experience in the region, such as SADC troops, thus reducing Russia's chances of playing a role in the conflicts in Mali and Burkina Faso, which it seeks. It is likely that a South African-led international military mission would be formed with the participation of France and the support of the EU. This will be beneficial for Poland as the possible expansion of Islamist attacks to other parts of the country where Polish companies operate would endanger their interests. Mozambique is Poland's sixth-largest trade partner in Sub-Saharan Africa (PLN 747 million exchange in 2019), and since 2013 it has been part of the Go Africa promotional programme. Poland mainly imports components for carbon blends for the production of coke, but graphite deposits used in electric cars and tourism are also promising. For the political protection of Polish interests, it might be useful to activate contacts with the graduates of the Łukasiewicz scholarship programme from 2016–2018, when Mozambique was one of its priority countries.