

Ignorance, denial and insurgency in Mozambique

Friday 28 January 2022, by [JENTZSCH Corinna](#) (Date first published: 17 December 2021).

A new and different state is necessary to manage the complex problems in the region, but is it possible under the current regime that has fed the conflict?

It's been four years now since a small group of armed men [targeted](#) a police post in Mocímboa da Praia in northern Mozambique, a small act that grew into a major insurgency targeting civilians, occupying territory and forcing out a major energy company preparing to extract gas offshore in the province of Cabo Delgado. To date, [3500 people have been killed](#) in the armed conflict and [745,000 displaced](#). The insurgency came to an apparent halt this summer after Rwandan armed forces, and then the SADC mission to Mozambique ([SAMIM](#)), arrived in Mozambique to fight it. The current relative calm on the battlefield has invited reflections on whether the military approach is working and what should come next. How could the insurgency in Mozambique grow in this way, and is an international military intervention the right response to stop it?

Much of the current debate among policy makers and analysts makes important assumptions about why and how insurgency begins, pointing to either external influences, such as transnational Islamist terrorism, or the long-term lack of development and marginalization of people in the northern region of Mozambique, leading to grievances that motivate the young and poor to join the insurgency. While these aspects certainly have played a role in Mozambique, we need to take into account the government's response and how it has helped escalate the conflict and strengthened the insurgency. Ignorance and denial have been core government attitudes that left the party in power, Frelimo, with little understanding and capacity to respond to the growing unrest in Cabo Delgado. Instead, the response of choice—severe repression and a lack of respect for human rights—has nurtured the rebellion. The current stability is therefore, in all likelihood, temporary.

A slowly growing insurgency

The conflict began with the formation of a religious Islamic sect in 2007, which [sought](#) to withdraw its members from the state. The first confrontations with the local police took place in 2015-2016, but armed violence only began in October 2017. The group is known as Al-Shabaab ("youth" in Arabic) or Ahlu Sunnah Wal-Jamâa. It pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2018 and was recognized as a wing of Islamic State's "Central African Province" in July 2019, but it remains unclear what the implications of this relationship are. Although violence initially was small-scale and directed at state armed forces, the insurgency began to target more civilians in 2019 and perpetrated severe forms of violence, such as [beheadings](#), against them throughout 2020 and beyond.

In 2020, the nature of the war changed completely when the armed group managed to occupy district towns in March for a few days, and then [captured](#) and occupied the town of Moçímboa da Praia in August for a year. International attention to the conflict suddenly skyrocketed in March 2021, when the armed group [conducted](#) the most sophisticated operation yet, an attack on the city

of Palma, with several dozen people dead, including expatriate workers on the liquified natural gas processing plant owned by TotalEnergies. This led to a major evacuation mission conducted mainly by helicopters operated by the Dyck Advisory Group (DAG), a private military company supporting the Mozambican government, and triggered a regional impetus to help Mozambique manage the crisis. TotalEnergies saw the events in Palma as a reason to temporarily [halt](#) its gas exploration project on the coast in April.

An inadequate government response

Early analyses of the conflict [pointed](#) to the fact that initial repressive actions by the local government and security forces were a contributing factor in the radicalization of the conflict to armed violence in October 2017. Until early this year, the police forces were in charge of responding to the insurgency, with their infamous Rapid Intervention Unit (RIU), which allegedly committed indiscriminate violence against civilians. In January, the government [assigned](#) the task to the military and appointed a new military commander, who, however, shortly afterwards died of COVID-19.

Up until the spring of 2021, the government resisted inviting international military deployments and relied on private companies for military and logistical support and bilateral training missions. Officially, President Nyusi was eager to [protect](#) “Mozambique’s sovereignty,” in an apparent reference to a history of foreign meddling when Rhodesia and Apartheid South Africa supported the rebel group Renamo on Mozambican soil. Nyusi, instead, relied on old and trusted international partners, but the results were mixed. The Russian Wagner group didn’t stay long, [leaving](#) Mozambique in November 2019 after a two-month deployment and conflicts with the Mozambican authorities about the counterinsurgent strategy. In April 2020, the Mozambican government [hired](#) DAG, led by Colonel Lionel Dyck who helped Frelimo fight the Renamo rebels in the 1980s. After a year of activity, the Mozambican government let the contract with DAG expire.

Only after the traumatic attack on Palma in March 2021 did the Mozambican government change course and accept international military deployments to fight the insurgency. In July, the Rwandans [sent](#) troops to northern Mozambique. The SADC mission was [launched](#) in August. In a militarily and symbolically significant operation early August, Rwandan and Mozambican armed forces [retook](#) Mocímboa da Praia from the insurgents. However, many analysts [agree](#) that the success of the international forces is only temporary, as the root causes of the conflict have been left unaddressed, and the insurgents—in typical guerrilla style—have dispersed to regroup and attack elsewhere. Refugees have begun to return to their areas of origin, and international aid organizations have promised to support them with aid and projects so that socio-economic reasons to support the insurgency could disappear. But will this work?

The state has lost trust and remains unaccountable

From the beginning, the Mozambican government did not seem interested in any of the many theories that scholars developed about the origins of the insurgency. The government actively hindered scholars and analysts’ efforts to speak to officials, militants and the displaced in the region, and even [detained](#) local journalists and [expelled](#) a British journalist covering the insurgency. After [blaming](#) various illegitimate groups in society and foreigners, in his statements on the conflict, President Nyusi has largely settled on the perspective that the insurgency has external origins and transnational terrorism is responsible for the violence. This is a perspective that Rwanda [supports](#), as it helps justify why Rwanda is militarily active in Mozambique—an issue that has [raised](#) a lot of suspicions. And it has triggered US interest in the conflict; the US [designated](#) the armed group an affiliate of ISIS and a foreign terrorist organization in March 2021, an action many observers say will not necessarily help solve the conflict.

Mozambique's counterinsurgency response has also raised a lot of criticism, as it failed to protect civilians. [Problems of coordination](#) between DAG and Mozambican ground forces lead to civilian casualties and [friendly fire casualties](#) among the Mozambican security forces. When the government forces took back Palma in March, they [looted and vandalized](#) private businesses, including banks, and residences. Amnesty International [accused](#) private contractors, such as the DAG, as well as state armed forces of human rights abuses, and the police of harassment and extortion. As a result, the civilian population does not trust the state and its (hired) armed forces to protect them.

The government recognizes that the armed conflict is not over yet. But it does not recognize its own role in escalating the conflict and its comprehensive responsibility in solving it. Joseph Hanlon, long-term observer of Mozambique, inspired by the failures in Afghanistan, frequently [cites](#) in his newsletter those voices that warn of military solutions to armed rebellion, emphasizing instead long-term development efforts. But much of the government response is shaped by catering to the oil and gas firms, as a recent reshuffle of ministers after a meeting with Exxon executives—who underlined the importance of further security improvements before their activities could continue—[shows](#). In remarks on Armed Forces Day in September, President Nyusi [stated](#) that the main priority is improving security for the gas projects.

Overall, the government has not only obscured the origins of, but also the response to the Cabo Delgado insurgency. Transparency around the government's counterinsurgency strategy is [lacking](#). Contracts with private security companies are not made public, and Parliament has not had any say in the deployment of foreign troops. It's no accident then that a recent ISS policy brief [recommends completely](#) rebuilding state institutions in the region and freeing them of corruption to build "islands of integrity." A new and different state is necessary to manage the complex problems in the region, but is it possible under the current regime that has [fed](#) the conflict?

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