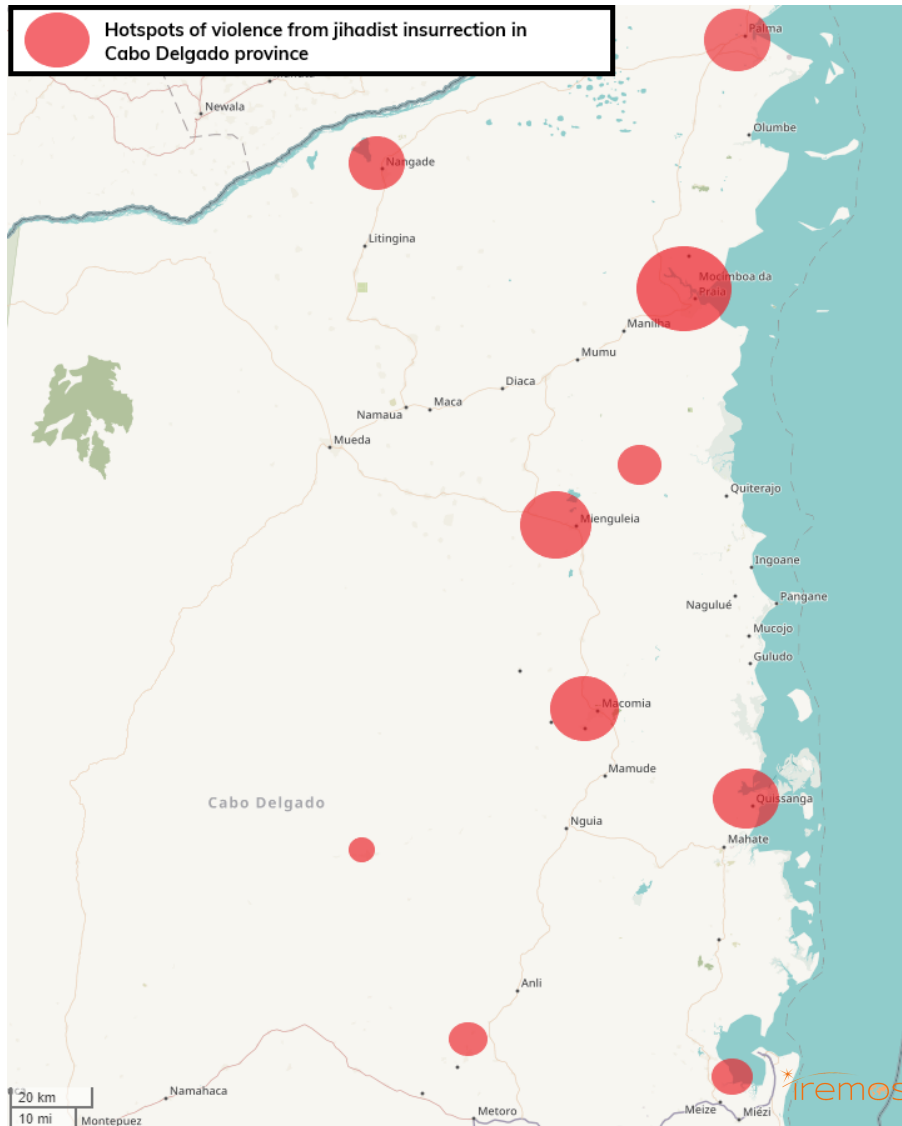


MOZAMBIQUE : JIHADIST INSURRECTION IN CABO DELGADO



IN SHORT

On 27 June, eight workers from a Total subcontractor company were killed in an armed ambush in Mocimboa da Praia, in Cabo Delgado province. As a veritable gas Eldorado, the region has seen an influx of major foreign oil companies in recent years, providing a colossal financial and commercial opportunity for this poor country whose political stability is still fragile. However, this province, which has become highly strategic, is prey to a jihadist insurrection whose contours are still unclear, but which is becoming increasingly violent, threatening not only the integrity of the central State but also foreign interests. Who are these jihadist militants of the "Ansar al Sunna" group, which is responsible for most of the attacks? What is the extent of the current threat?

MAIN ATTACKS

27/06/2020: Mocimboa da Praia: At least 8 workers of a Total subcontractor company killed in an armed ambush.

07/04/2020: Muidumbe: About 52 dead after raids by Islamic militants in villages in the area, numerous looting and ransacking.

23/03/2020: Mocimboa da Praia: 20 dead in clashes between the army and the insurgents; capture of the town's port.

22/02/2019 : Palma : 1 dead and 6 injured in 2 targeted attacks on the American oil tanker Anadarko.

IN NUMBERS



MOZAMBIQUE : JIHADIST INSURRECTION IN CABO DELGADO

ANALYSIS

The origins: Ansar al Sunna, a non-violent religious organization?

In 2015, the Ansar al-Sunna group (also called Ahl al-sunna wa al-Jama or al-Shabab, 'the young', not to be confused with Somali terrorists), a religious organisation made up of young people close to Salafist circles in Tanzania, Kenya and Somalia, emerged in the deprived province of Cabo Delgado. Campaigning for the application of Sharia law in the province and claiming to be fighting against the corrupt elite in Maputo, the organisation aimed to be nonviolent at first. Nevertheless, their rhetoric became increasingly virulent towards local authorities and Sufi communities (considered esoteric) on the issue of the place of Islam and its interpretation in the region. Militancy became more formalized with the creation of training camps and the construction of mosques to preach a fundamentalist Wahhabi Islam. The group initially financed itself through illicit trafficking and smuggling of products such as wood, ivory, rubber or charcoal with criminal partners in Tanzania and the Lakes region. The group's ambitions gradually materialized in a campaign of intimidation of local populations and attacks on local institutional buildings. While spreading its vision of Islam, the group has offered financial aid to the people of the province - the majority of whom are Muslims - taking advantage of their economic vulnerability to create a support base. As the region is particularly poor and marginalized compared to the rest of the country, Ansar al Sunna is fuelling local resentment towards the central government.

In October 2017, Ansar al Sunna launched its first armed offensive against three police stations in the port of Mocimboa da Praia, killing 17 people.

2017-2020: Rise of the jihadist insurgency in Cabo Delgado

Between 2017 and 2020, Ansar al Sunna not only extended its territorial hold across the Cabo Delgado province, but also intensified its campaign of violence with enhanced means and more sophisticated modus operandi. In total, violence has caused the deaths of nearly 1,300 people, the majority of them civilians, and more than 210,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs).

In 2017, its scope of action was mainly concentrated around the town of Mocimboa da Praia, but it has expanded to the neighbouring towns and villages of Macomia, Mitumba, Nangade, Palma, Quissanga, Ancuabe, Ibo and Meluco from 2018 until today.

The attacks have increased in frequency, but also in intensity, being increasingly violent. From only two offensives per month in 2017, there are on average 20 attacks per month in 2020. Violence is becoming more systematic, with a well-established modus operandi involving looting and burning of villages, kidnapping and massacres. Increasingly indiscriminate, the attacks target both civilians and security forces, whose presence in the region has increased since the beginning of the insurgency. The deployment of foreign troops and private military companies, including Russian and South African ones, has by no means stopped the cycle of violence. On the contrary, the militants have increased the number of ambushes against the security forces, particularly to seize weapons and equipment. They thus employ increasingly sophisticated attack techniques, heavily armed and sometimes dressed in military uniforms, going as far as to target strategic infrastructure (roads, bridges, telecommunications). In addition, the use of drones and the increasing number of beheadings and kidnappings of young girls are based on the Boko Haram or Islamic state model.

MOZAMBIQUE : JIHADIST INSURRECTION IN CABO DELGADO

ANALYSIS

Affiliation with the Islamic state: a growing threat to foreign interests?

Not only is their modus operandi bringing them closer and closer to terrorist groups in the Sahel and Lake Chad, but the rise in the scale of the attacks suggests that they would benefit from financial and logistical support from outside organisations. The group is believed to have links with the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) rebels operating in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Rumours of regional terrorist interference emerged in June 2019 when ISIS claimed its first attack in the country, under the banner of the "Islamic State in Central Africa" (ISCAP, whose wilayat also covers the DRC). ISIS' attribution of the attacks in Cabo Delgado thus appeared opportunistic, as the presence of the terrorist organisation in the province was not proven. However, in recent months, the affiliation with the Islamic State seems to have consolidated. During an attack on a police station on 23 March 2020, Ansar al Sunna militants waved the ISIS black flag. Since then, the ISCAP has claimed new attacks and its propaganda has intensified. While Ansar al Sunna exploits local social and economic grievances in opposition to the Maputo government, recent attacks and threats against foreign interests seem to be more tainted by the internationalist vision of the Islamic state. In a recent article in one of his official media outlets, al-Naba, Daesh explicitly threatens foreign investors and countries that would assist the government in counter-insurgency efforts, pointing particularly at South Africa.



The armed ambush on 27 June against Total subcontractor employees, as well as a double attack against the American oil group Anadarko in February 2019, demonstrates the insurgents' ability to successfully execute such threats. The attacks have constrained oil giants present on site to take contingency measures, fearing for their employees' safety and the continuity of their activities. Anadarko reportedly suspended its operations in Palma in June 2018 due to the poor security situation. In February 2020, ExxonMobil and Total reportedly requested the deployment of troops from Maputo to ensure the security of their operations. Nevertheless, Total is about to complete the financing of nearly €23 billion in a mega project to develop offshore liquefied natural gas (LNG) fields. Located in Palma, it could be operational by 2024.

MOZAMBIQUE : JIHADIST INSURRECTION IN CABO DELGADO

ANALYSIS

Prospective

Ansar al Sunna's growth follows similar logic to those of terrorist organisations such as the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) or Boko Haram, when they had achieved strong operational capabilities. Nevertheless, the Mozambican jihadist insurgency does not have the same ideological and expansionist ambitions. Indeed, for the time being, few indicators point to a desire to extend their influence beyond Cabo Delgado province, where their territorial hold has, however, been considerably strengthened over the past three years. Their presence in the province, which has become highly strategic, serves to destabilize the central government. Their primary objective is the strict application of Sharia law at the local level, in conflict with Mozambican law, carried by the Maputo elites. In the long term, as its links with regional terrorist organisations and/or border armed criminal groups become stronger, Ansar al Sunna may expand its scope of action throughout the country and beyond. This positioning would allow the Islamic state to pursue its expansion strategy in Central and East Africa, well beyond the Sahel strip.

Faced with the lack of resources of the Mozambican army and in the absence of qualification of the jihadist threat as such by the government, the insurrection is not currently facing any obstacle. The frequency and intensity of attacks is expected to continue exponentially and indiscriminately against civilians and security forces (army, private military companies). In view of the multiplication of gas development projects in the province, attacks could be increasingly targeting the interests of foreign groups (sites and individuals).



RECOMMENDATIONS

In case of imperative travels in the province of Cabo Delgado :

- Plan meticulously : country risk training, safety plan, including evacuation;
- Be accompanied by an escort (armed if possible);
- Have emergency communication means available 24/24;
- Never leave the main roads;
- Choose accommodation that meets strict security standards and is guarded;
- Exercise increased vigilance in the vicinity of local or security institutions.