



Combating the Islamic State's Spread in Africa

ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR MOZAMBIQUE

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A M E R I C A N E N T E R P R I S E I N S T I T U T E

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Executive Summary

The global Salafi-jihadi movement, which includes al Qaeda and the Islamic State, is spreading in Africa. An Islamic State-linked group in northern Mozambique is the latest case of a Salafi-jihadi group co-opting and expanding a local conflict. This insurgency, like those in Mali and Somalia, promises to spread into neighboring countries and deliver an enduring haven to extremist militants with regional and global ambitions while exacting a steep humanitarian toll.

Salafi-jihadi threats embedded in local conflicts are already plaguing several of Africa's largest populations and economies. Algeria, Egypt, Kenya, and Nigeria face insurgencies within or across their borders. The Salafi-jihadi insurgency in northern Mozambique risks adding two significant economies—South Africa and Tanzania—to this list of vulnerable countries.

This report identifies several implications should the Islamic State in Mozambique (IS-M) continue its current trajectory.

- **IS-M Will Establish a Lasting Foothold in Cabo Delgado Province.** The Mozambican government is unlikely to sustain a military presence in Cabo Delgado due to security-sector deficiencies and competing priorities. Cabo Delgado will likely become a no-man's-land with some pockets of IS-M control over populations.
- **Poor Responses to the IS-M Insurgency Will Make It Worse.** Reports of Mozambican soldiers engaged in human rights abuses demonstrate the risk that an extended military response will add fuel to the fire by generating legitimate grievances against the government.
- **The IS-M Insurgency Will Worsen Political Instability in Mozambique.** The interplay between the IS-M insurgency and the country's political and security dynamics could reignite

simmering conflict among rival factions from the country's 15-year civil war. Failure to deal with the IS-M problem will also cripple the Mozambican economy in the future.

- **IS-M May Target Other Countries in Eastern and Southern Africa.** Terrorist attacks in South Africa or deeper in Tanzanian territory could further internationalize what is now a geographically contained insurgency.
- **How the Worsening Humanitarian and Displacement Crisis Is Handled Matters for Preventing Further Radicalization.** Internally displaced persons (IDPs) who face violence or discrimination could opt to return under IS-M control, which will further entrench the insurgency and risk greater retaliatory violence against vulnerable IDP populations.

Preventing the formation of a permanent Salafi-jihadi enclave on the Mozambican coast requires an international effort. The Mozambican government lacks the resources and capability to address the immediate security and humanitarian challenges. It must also pursue a long-term resolution to the underlying grievances in the remote northern province where Salafi-jihadi militants are active. Solving these challenges requires international support beyond the government's current reliance on private military contractors and armed vigilante groups.

The IS-M insurgency is a solvable problem for the international community. It will become more difficult and more expensive, however, if IS-M becomes deeply entrenched and this conflict draws in external players pursuing their own interests. This report proposes steps that a range of international actors can take to help the Mozambican government effectively resolve the Cabo Delgado crisis.

- **Security Response.** Multilateral or bilateral security-sector support is needed to recapture and hold terrain from IS-M and ensure the accountability of security personnel. The international response should include limited military support for naval, counterinsurgency, and border security operations, focusing on ensuring the accountability of security personnel. The key challenge for the Mozambican government and its partners is defeating the IS-M insurgency without creating the conditions for renewed violence in the future. Any lasting solution will require effectively transitioning insurgents back to civilian life by providing exit pathways for reconcilable IS-M combatants and affiliated individuals.
- **Diplomatic Response.** International organizations and foreign governments with an interest in Mozambique's stability should focus on managing the regional tensions exacerbated by the IS-M insurgency, to prevent the conflict from becoming transnational.
- **Humanitarian Response.** A strong and effective humanitarian response is crucial to support

broader security objectives, including mitigating IS-M radicalization and recruitment. The human toll of the current conflict greatly exceeds the Mozambican government's ability to respond. International actors, ranging from UN agencies to donor governments to nongovernmental organizations, are needed to fill the gap by providing humanitarian relief to the hundreds of thousands of individuals displaced by IS-M's attacks. The humanitarian response must identify and meet both individual and community needs, to facilitate IDPs' return to their homes and productive economic activity as soon as the security situation permits.

The security and humanitarian responses will require challenging the extremist ideology that has been grafted onto local grievances in Cabo Delgado province. This will require building support for locally recognized and valued religious leadership in the Muslim and Christian communities. A disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration program should include a countering violent extremism component and be embedded in a broader strategy dealing with Cabo Delgado's IDPs.

Introduction

The rapid growth of an Islamic State affiliate in northern Mozambique is the latest iteration of a frightening trend. Salafi-jihadi insurgencies, led by groups affiliated with al Qaeda and the Islamic State, are maturing across much of Africa. Several of Africa’s largest populations and economies face a Salafi-jihadi threat, either in their own territory or across borders in unstable neighbors’ territory. In North Africa, Egypt is fighting an Islamic State insurgency in its Sinai Peninsula, and Algeria is managing terrorism threats across its borders with Libya, Mali, and Tunisia. In West Africa, Nigeria faces an increasingly lethal insurgency in the northeast and a growing threat from the Sahel region to the northwest.

East Africa is destabilizing on several fronts, placing key states at great risk. Somalia is a chronically failed state whose own Salafi-jihadi insurgency has spilled into Kenya and now poses a growing threat to Ethiopia, which recently descended into internal conflict.¹ A burgeoning insurgency in Mozambique risks creating a new permanent Salafi-jihadi foothold on the East African coast and generating new threats to two more African economic powerhouses: South Africa and Tanzania.

The Salafi-jihadi insurgency in Mozambique, like others in Africa, is co-opting and stoking local conflicts by translating historical narratives of grievance into extremist ideological terms. This insurgency, located in the remote province of Cabo Delgado in northern Mozambique (see Figure 1), is rooted in long-standing social and economic conditions. But

Figure 1. Map of Mozambique



Source: Authors.

the insurgent group—referred to here as the Islamic State in Mozambique (IS-M)—formed and expanded due to more direct drivers, including recent economic changes, the Mozambican state’s handling of governance challenges, and the influence of regional and global Salafi-jihadi organizations.

The effects of the IS-M insurgency are serious and growing. The group is challenging the Mozambican government’s control over Cabo Delgado and threatening liquefied natural gas (LNG) production that is

the cornerstone of Mozambique's future economic growth.² IS-M has also created a humanitarian crisis, displacing more than 424,000 people and undermining the country's COVID-19 response. The insurgency risks worsening political instability in Mozambique and neighboring countries.

IS-M is on track to establish a permanent base for future attacks inside Mozambique and beyond. IS-M also benefits the global Islamic State organization,

which increasingly relies on its African affiliates to demonstrate success. The Mozambican government's current response will not defeat IS-M and may make the insurgency worse.

Part I of this report provides an assessment of the IS-M insurgency, including its development and capabilities. Part II provides policy implications and recommendations.

I. Assessing the Northern Mozambique Insurgency

The IS-M insurgency emerged from the convergence of multiple trends, including deteriorating social and economic conditions and active regional and global Salafi-jihadi networks. Cabo Delgado's historically marginalized inhabitants constitute the bulk of Mozambique's Muslim population. Unmet economic expectations linked to LNG discoveries combined with disruptions to traditional livelihoods and recent natural disasters to amplify existing frustrations. These trends intersected with a religious splinter group rooted in local and international Salafi movements that developed into an armed movement with ties to regional Salafi-jihadi networks by 2015. The combination of this multifaceted challenge with a botched security response expanded the armed insurgency into a conflict with national and regional implications. The Islamic State's leadership took notice and recognized the Mozambican group as part of its network in June 2019. The insurgency's rate of attacks and brutality has continued to increase. It has begun to hold territory in Cabo Delgado and has displaced hundreds of thousands of people.

Background

Mozambique borders eSwatini (formerly Swaziland), Malawi, Tanzania, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe to the west. Mozambique's eastern border features a 2,500-kilometer Indian Ocean coastline. The country gained independence from Portuguese colonial control in 1975 following an armed insurgency by the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO). FRELIMO, now a political party, has maintained political dominance since independence. It fought

A Note on Naming

This insurgent group goes by many names, and the group itself has not declared one. We refer to the group as the Islamic State in Mozambique (IS-M) throughout this report. This choice is for ease of reading and should not be taken as an overstatement of the group's relationship to Islamic State leadership. Alternate names include:

- **Al Shabaab (“the Youth”)**. The group has become known as al Shabaab locally. It should not be confused with al Shabaab in Somalia (Harakat al Shabaab al Mujahideen).
- **Ahlu Sunna wa al Jama'a (“the People of the Sunnah and the Community”)**. The armed insurgency and a predecessor sect used this term, which can refer to Sunni Muslims broadly and is used by many other organizations, including a paramilitary group in Somalia.
- **Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCA or ISCAP)**. This is the Islamic State's official designation for its affiliates in Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). IS-M and ISCA's Mozambique branch are considered synonymous in this report, but IS-M is used to avoid confusion with the ISCA's DRC branch.

a 15-year civil war against the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO) until 1992.

Religious and Ethnic Dynamics.

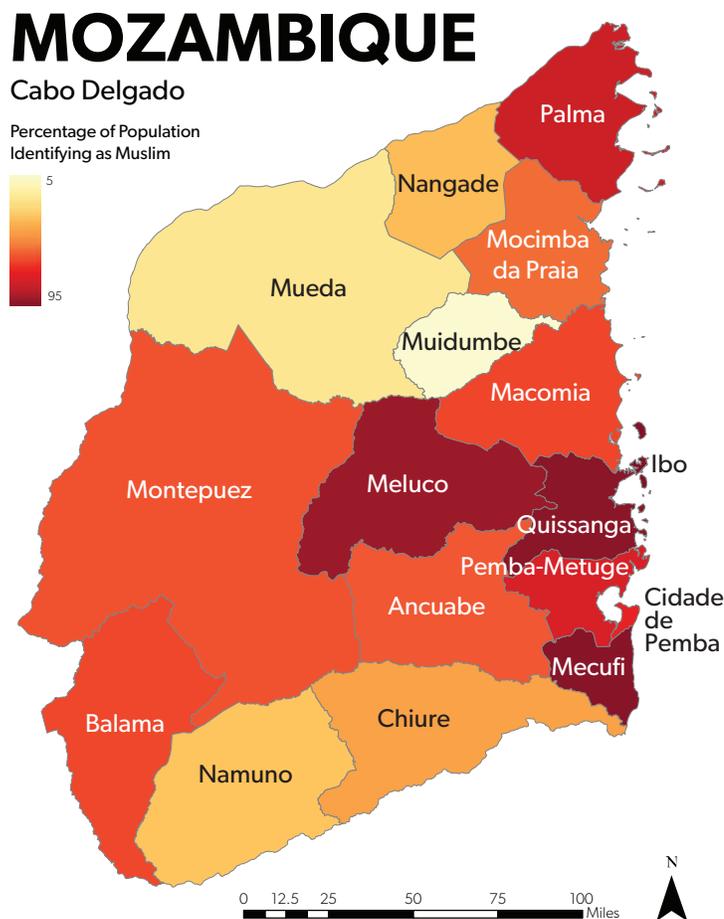
Mozambique is a majority Christian country with a one-fifth Muslim minority. Most Mozambican Muslims live in the country's north. Cabo Delgado province's population is 52.5 percent Muslim and 36 percent Catholic according to the 2017 census. Muslims constitute more than 75 percent of the population in six of the province's 17 districts. (See Figure 2.)

The confessional divides in Cabo Delgado overlay ethno-linguistic differences. Ethnic groups in Mozambique closely align with local Bantu languages, which include Makonde, Makuhwa (Macua or Makua), and Mwani. Most people speak Makonde in Nagade, Mueda, and Muidumbe districts near the Tanzanian border, which are Christian-majority areas. Makuhwa is most common in Palma in the north and in southern Cabo Delgado.³ Coastal Mocímboa da Praia and Ibo districts have large Mwani-speaking populations. Makuhwa and Mwani overlap with Muslim-majority areas.

Insurgent recruitment appears to target the Mwani population, which has been marginalized since Mozambique's independence. The Mwani community was historically part of the coastal Swahili economic network and is perceived locally as a protector of Islamic traditions.⁴ LNG-related relocations and conflict-related displacement have severely affected the Mwani. In-migration and the political influence of the Makonde population also contribute to Mwani marginalization.⁵

The linguistic and religious diversity of northern Mozambique suggests that any effort to understand the conflict through an exclusively ethnic or religious frame neglects the complexity of the human terrain.

Figure 2. Percentage of Population Identifying as Muslim in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique



Source: The 2017 census data are from the Instituto Nacional de Estatística de Moçambique. The map was created by Cole Rosner, "Mozambique Cabo Delgado," American University, Geospatial Research Lab.

Economic Conditions. Cabo Delgado's residents have historically been marginalized, creating grievances against the national government in the capital, Maputo, more than 1,000 miles away. Only an estimated 12.5 percent of Cabo Delgado households have electricity.⁶ Internet and media penetration remain extremely low.⁷ Other indicators suggest the extent of state neglect: Only 17.5 percent of women in Cabo Delgado province are literate, compared with 85 percent of women in Maputo province. Cabo Delgado similarly ranks lowest in the country for women with secondary or higher education at 7.9 percent.⁸

Table 1. Conditions and Catalysts of the Cabo Delgado Insurgency

Conditions	Catalysts
<p>Poor Governance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political marginalization • Lingering effects of prior conflicts • Security-sector vulnerabilities 	<p>Poor Governance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Armed crackdown on religious splinter group • Mishandling of initial insurgency
<p>Economic Marginalization</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corruption or cronyism • Lack of jobs leading to delayed social advancement • Underinvestment in service provision 	<p>Economic Marginalization</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simultaneous disruption of multiple local industries due to natural disasters and industrial consolidation • High expectations for local benefits from LNG development
<p>Ethnic, Class, and Religious Tensions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generational divide in Muslim population • Influence of foreign-funded Wahhabi education • Prior connection to East African Islamist networks • Fragmentation of Makonde, Makuhwa, and Mwani speakers 	<p>Ethnic, Class, and Religious Tensions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inputs from Tanzanian Salafi-jihadi network

Source: Authors.

Extractive foreign economic projects raised the population's expectations for economic development in northern Mozambique but have not met them, and some situations have escalated to violence.⁹ Frustrations over unmet economic expectations have been heightened by the perception and reality that “foreigners”—from either other regions of Mozambique or abroad—are benefiting instead.¹⁰ Low educational attainment in Cabo Delgado means foreign companies that have declared their intent to hire local labor still need to hire from elsewhere in Mozambique or from other countries, notably neighboring Zimbabwe¹¹ and the Philippines, to perform required duties.

Disruptions to multiple local industries also threaten traditional livelihoods. International conglomerates' activities have “squeezed out” Muslim populations from their ancestral lands.¹² Natural disasters have also contributed to displacement, which deeply affects individuals whose livelihoods rely on agricultural production or fishing. The ongoing armed conflict has tripled down on this displacement, impeding civilians' ability to return to regular economic activity.

Government and corporate responses to local backlash have likely fueled grievances and set conditions for an insurgency. Tighter controls by the state and private businesses have contributed to loss of revenue from artisanal mining and illegal logging. Disproportionate use of force by police and private security to enforce these controls contributes to popular dissatisfaction.¹³ Excessive fees have also harmed local informal vendors.¹⁴ A UK-based mining company has been accused of human rights abuses and land expropriation that have fueled violence and contributed to the arming of the population.¹⁵ A Mozambican government crackdown on domestic and foreign artisanal miners in early 2017 displaced local people and contributed to the circulation of weapons in the illicit economy.¹⁶ International companies have reportedly expropriated land without proper compensation.¹⁷

Cabo Delgado is a thoroughfare for major smuggling networks, including a human trafficking route southward to South Africa, a southern route for the transport of opium originating in Afghanistan, and the illegal trade and transport of drugs, gemstones,

timber, and ivory.¹⁸ The illicit flows through this region also likely facilitate the movement of militants and extremists from the Horn of Africa and Great Lakes region into northern Mozambique.

Economic dislocation driven by these changes disrupts societal functioning and contributes to a preexisting “sense of ‘political exclusion’” in Cabo Delgado.¹⁹ Particularly important is the expectation that young men must have the resources and ability to establish their own household before marriage. This norm makes young men approaching marriageable age particularly vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups that can offer the prospect of an income or other economic opportunities. Similar dynamics have been observed in the context of other insurgencies, including in Burkina Faso and Uganda.²⁰

Development of the Insurgency

The IS-M insurgency is rooted in long-standing social and economic conditions but has expanded due to more direct drivers, including recent economic changes, the Mozambican state’s handling of governance challenges, and the influence of regional and global Salafi-jihadi organizations.

Religious Splinter Group Turns Violent. Ideological and generational schisms among Muslim leaders in northern Mozambique set the conditions for today’s Salafi-jihadi insurgency. (See Table 1.) One contributing factor is Wahhabi religious education, introduced in the early 1990s, including nongovernmental organization-funded local programs and foreign travel to North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia.²¹ Foreign religious study created an expectation mismatch in which students, particularly those returning from Saudi Arabia, were unable to find jobs in Mozambique and found fault with indigenous Sufi traditions.²² The issue of religious authority also became fraught because the official Islamic Council of Mozambique is perceived as being too closely connected to the state at the expense of conservative Muslims, who are prevented from holding political office.²³ Tanzanian sheikhs traditionally were accepted as religious

authorities,²⁴ further fragmenting religious authority in Cabo Delgado.

A separatist Salafi movement formed in Cabo Delgado in response to these dynamics, possibly in 2007 though estimates vary.²⁵ Its members kept their children out of school and challenged local imams.²⁶ This movement intersected with the rising influence of East African Salafi-jihadi networks in northern Mozambique. Followers of the extremist Kenyan cleric Aboud Rogo Mohammed, who was killed in Mombasa, Kenya, in 2012, moved southward into Tanzania before crossing into Cabo Delgado by 2015.²⁷ This cross-border relationship reflects long-standing religious, social, and economic connections among mostly Mwani populations on either side of the Tanzanian-Mozambican border, including the in-migration of young men seeking work in Cabo Delgado.²⁸

Cabo Delgado’s Salafi movement was initially peaceful but laid the groundwork for future militarization. It ran mosques in the Mocímboa da Praia area whose students now participate in militias.²⁹ The group also sent young men to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, Somalia, and Tanzania for military training; brought radical clerics to Mozambique; and paid former policemen and border guards for military training.³⁰

The transformation into an armed movement escalated by 2015, when members of the Salafi movement ran afoul of religious authorities and were expelled from mosques.³¹ The situation tipped into violence in 2016 as the movement engaged in increasingly violent interactions with the state.³² A harsh police crackdown catalyzed the movement’s transformation into an insurgent group. It conducted its first recognized attack in October 2017,³³ targeting a police station to free jailed members.³⁴

Early Stages: 2017–18. The insurgency was narrow in scope at the time of the initial October 2017 attack.³⁵ The group recruited through preexisting social ties, including familial and friendship-based relationships, predominantly attracting young men from Cabo Delgado and neighboring provinces.³⁶ Its goal was to institute its interpretation of Islamic practice and governance locally. An early video from the

How Islamic State in Mozambique (IS-M) Benefits the Islamic State

The Islamic State increasingly relies on its African affiliates to demonstrate its continued existence and expansion as it suffers losses in the Middle East.⁵¹ Islamic State media outlets announced the formation of the Islamic State's Central African Province (ISCA) during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, when the organization typically increases attacks to demonstrate its global reach. The Islamic State's claiming of attacks in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique under ISCA in June 2019 was likely intended as counter messaging to the Islamic State's loss of its final territorial stronghold in Syria earlier that year. The Islamic State may have relaxed its criteria for granting province status for IS-M, which was not controlling territory when it was accepted.⁵²

ISCA media covering IS-M's activities emphasizes several main themes that are common throughout Islamic State media: targeting "crusader" Christians including Russians, breaking "artificial" borders, demonstrating the Islamic State's persistence and expansion, and threatening Western natural gas projects. The Islamic State's emphasis on targeting Christians in Mozambique likely overemphasizes IS-M's actual focus on these attacks. Attack

claims by the Islamic State also overstate the degree to which IS-M targets security forces over civilians. Islamic State media has also sought to ward off foreign intervention in northern Mozambique, notably threatening attacks against South Africa should it intervene and framing Mozambique as another quagmire for the West.⁵³

IS-M may more concretely benefit the Islamic State if it becomes more embedded in Cabo Delgado. The illicit economy makes Cabo Delgado a potential revenue-generation node. A beachhead in Mozambique could also allow the Islamic State to project threats into more powerful states that Salafi-jihadis have had limited ability to target, notably South Africa and Tanzania. Remote Cabo Delgado is unlikely to become a recruitment hub, but a long-term IS-M haven there may provide a fallback option for the Islamic State's organization in East Africa, particularly as the Somali branch remains under pressure. A larger, internationalized conflict in Mozambique could mobilize fighters across eastern and southern Africa to join. Finally, IS-M represents an Islamic State foothold where its rival al Qaeda is not present.⁵⁴

group in January 2018 featured a militant calling for the overthrow of the Mozambican government.³⁷

The government's response to this initial attack failed on two counts. First, the approach was extremely harsh and included mass arrests and mosque closures³⁸ that deepened the population's grievances. In other countries, security force abuses have been identified as a driver of radicalization.³⁹ Second, the response failed to crush the insurgency militarily despite security officials' claims to have restored order.⁴⁰

Expansion and the Islamic State's Entry: 2018–19. The Cabo Delgado insurgency took a brutal turn in 2018. The group introduced beheadings and started targeting civilians—mostly men, but

some women and children—by mid-2018. The violence shifted from Mocímboa da Praia district to six other areas in Cabo Delgado, indicating that multiple cells were active simultaneously.⁴¹ Displacement also increased,⁴² and limited cases of armed civilian resistance did not stymie the insurgency's expansion.⁴³ Militants also began to target Christian homes and churches more overtly in mid-2018.⁴⁴

Events in Tanzania likely contributed to the group's growth. State pressure following a wave of killings in the country in 2017–18 forced Tanzanian-based Salafi-jihadi militants to shift to northern Mozambique.⁴⁵ There are also unconfirmed reports that a group of al Shabaab defectors from Somalia pledged to the Islamic State and infiltrated northern Mozambique through Tanzania in April 2018.⁴⁶

The group continued to develop in 2019. It expanded to new areas, with Macomia district becoming a center of violence, and began regularly targeting civilian vehicles in a bid to increase its control over roads.⁴⁷

The group formally affiliated with the Islamic State in 2019. Islamic State media outlets began claiming attacks in Mozambique under the newly formed Islamic State's Central African Province (ISCA) in June 2019 alongside attacks by another branch in the DRC.⁴⁸ ISCA released its first video showing fighters in Mozambique in July 2019.⁴⁹ IS-M had adopted many characteristics often associated with the Islamic State—beheadings and the targeting of Christians—a year before Islamic State media began claiming attacks in Mozambique, indicating the group may have been bidding for inclusion.

IS-M's affiliation with the Islamic State has likely helped it attract foreign fighters. The Islamic State likely drove some foreign fighter movement to Mozambique, particularly during and after the deployment of Russian mercenaries in September 2019.⁵⁰

Tactical Evolution and New Fronts: 2020. IS-M notably improved its attack capability in early 2019, enabling attacks on strategic targets, notably the Mocímboa da Praia port. In March 2020, the group conducted a coordinated attack on the town of Mocímboa da Praia that included controlling access roads and attacking from speedboats.⁵⁵ The militants warned civilians to evacuate the site before targeting security forces, many of which had begun withdrawing days before. The militants also targeted economic, governmental, and security infrastructure, including the garrison, administrative buildings, banks, and gas stations, before leaving the town.

This tactical evolution comes alongside a doubling of IS-M's attack rate in 2020. The bulk of the group's attacks target civilians and directly and indirectly cause massive population displacement. The share of attacks targeting security forces has increased slightly, though this may be because so many civilians have abandoned their homes.⁵⁶ The group's limited media also displays more confidence

as militants have begun showing their unmasked faces in videos.⁵⁷

IS-M's increase in capabilities in the months following its official incorporation into the Islamic State may reflect strategic or tactical guidance from the parent organization, but this expertise is also present in the East African Salafi-jihadi networks to which IS-M is connected.⁵⁸

IS-M hit another milestone in August 2020 by seizing and holding a population center in Cabo Delgado. The group returned to the town of Mocímboa da Praia and still hold it as of February 2021. The group has used Mocímboa da Praia as a base for maritime attacks targeting vessels and nearby islands.⁵⁹ IS-M seized another district, Muidumbe, to expand its territorial control in Cabo Delgado in late October, and fighting continued throughout December.⁶⁰

IS-M made a notable incursion into neighboring Tanzania in October 2020 that continued a trend of attacking militarized security targets. This was the first attack claimed by the Islamic State and the most substantial IS-M attack thus far in Tanzania. A video message purportedly from the attack included a threat to Tanzania's president in the week leading up to a fraught election.⁶¹ A subsequent postelection crackdown on the country's political opposition suggests that Tanzanian President John Magufuli remains concerned about his hold on power despite his increasing control over public life. Magufuli, a devout Catholic who has claimed that Christ protects against COVID-19,⁶² is an ideal target for Islamic State-driven narratives aimed at Tanzania's Muslim population. IS-M may also seek to target a major gas pipeline, which runs from Tanzania's Mtwara region through Tanzania's capital.⁶³

Mozambican forces resumed counter-IS-M operations in late October, but the government's reports of its successes thus far are likely exaggerated. Official sources emphasized targeting foreign leaders and stated the military was targeting a main IS-M base that the militants named "Syria" in Mocímboa da Praia district in late October.⁶⁴ Mozambican forces claimed to recapture Quissanga, a coastal town that IS-M has held since April, on December 8.⁶⁵

The IS-M Organization. IS-M's structure resembles that of other Salafi-jihadi groups, even as details of its leadership remain unknown. IS-M's top leader has not been publicly identified. It has a "supreme council."⁶⁶ At least some of the group's key leaders, including on this council, come from abroad and have ties to religious and military circles in Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania, and the Great Lakes region.⁶⁷ One leader is from Gambia in West Africa.⁶⁸ Some leaders have indirect ties to spiritual leaders from Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan.⁶⁹

IS-M's fighting force similarly has a major foreign presence. Many of IS-M's core fighters may be Tanzanian nationals.⁷⁰ IS-M also has members from South Africa and possibly farther afield from North Africa, the Middle East, or South Asia.⁷¹ Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi has accused foreign fighters of recruiting and training local young people.⁷²

An accurate estimate of IS-M's size is not publicly available. Various outlets and analysts have estimated the group has between 100 and 1,000 members since 2018, with the 1,000 figure increasingly common.⁷³ The broad geographic distribution of IS-M's activities across Cabo Delgado indicate that an estimate of 1,000 members, if accurate, likely refers to a core group of leadership and fighters. A larger logistical network that includes forcibly recruited women and children surrounds this core group.

IS-M operates in cells, which have coordinated in some cases.⁷⁴ Islamic State media patterns support a low-confidence assessment that the cells active throughout Cabo Delgado are tied, at least loosely, to a shared command structure. Islamic State media claims attacks throughout IS-M's area of operation in Cabo Delgado. This broad distribution of claims indicates the Islamic State media apparatus communicates with a central IS-M leadership structure rather than a single IS-M faction. If the Islamic State claimed attacks in only one area, this pattern would indicate that only a faction of IS-M was communicating with the Islamic State. This dynamic is visible in the case of the Islamic State's West Africa Province, which splintered with the part of the organization retaining its line of communication to and recognition from Islamic State leadership.

IS-M is part of a larger Islamic State structure in East Africa but likely retains significant autonomy. It is independent from the DRC branch of ISCA, though some movement of personnel, expertise, or resources among these branches is possible. A May 2020 UN Security Council report suggested that the Islamic State's branch in northern Somalia serves as the command node for the branches in the DRC and Mozambique.⁷⁵ The Somalia branch is small and under significant pressure, however, so decision-making authority would have to be decentralized.

The Islamic State's media on Mozambique targets an external audience rather than local Mozambican dynamics, which IS-M can reach instead with direct communication or its own locally produced media. A small dip in Islamic State media on Mozambique coincided with IS-M's circulation of independent videos in Swahili in May–June 2020, which is possibly a sign of tension between IS-M and Islamic State leadership.⁷⁶

IS-M Activities

IS-M's activities combine attacks on security and governmental targets, money-making activities including supply raids, voluntary and forced recruitment, and the mass displacement of civilians.

Military Campaign. IS-M's military capabilities are limited but increasing. It has primarily relied on small arms and bladed weapons but has added rocket-propelled grenades and drones used for surveillance.⁷⁷ The group has not yet fielded improvised explosive devices but likely has access to the materials and expertise required to do so. IS-M has shown a notable degree of strategy and restraint⁷⁸ and benefits from the weaknesses of the Mozambican security response.

IS-M is working to control land and sea routes, including the main north-south road in Cabo Delgado.⁷⁹ The group's control of the Mocímboa da Praia port allows it to conduct a small-boat naval campaign to disrupt military and civilian movement between islands and the coast while moving its own fighters and looting resources.⁸⁰

IS-M has developed intelligence capabilities to support its military efforts. Small groups of young people functioning as lookouts provide logistical support and spy on security forces.⁸¹ IS-M has likely recruited informants in the security forces who report on troop movements and allow IS-M to conduct raids shortly after resupplies.⁸² IS-M also threatens and intimidates civilians to prevent them from reporting its movements to security forces.⁸³

IS-M's military campaign, including its control of the Mocímboa da Praia port and airstrip, has hindered the Mozambican government's military response by making access and resupply more difficult.⁸⁴ IS-M's large area of operations also challenges Mozambican security forces by requiring them to operate in multiple areas in vast and difficult terrain. IS-M's targeting of cell towers and local radio stations may also be intended to disrupt coordination against it.⁸⁵

Making Money. A majority of IS-M attacks has targeted villages. One likely reason for these attacks is to raid supplies, including food. IS-M's access to sea routes also allows it to receive supplies, likely from Tanzania.⁸⁶ It receives some donations from abroad through electronic money transfers.⁸⁷ Existing illicit flows and raids on security forces provide matériel.

IS-M is forming a potentially lucrative nexus for criminal activity in Cabo Delgado. Instability can create more space for illegal business, encouraging partnerships between militants and criminals.⁸⁸

Recruiting. IS-M conducts both voluntary and coercive recruitment. It relies on family, marriage, and friendship ties; madrasas and mosques; youth associations; and businesses.⁸⁹ Word of mouth is important given limited electricity and media penetration. The group also provides economic incentives—including salaries, scholarships, and startup funding for small businesses⁹⁰—and promises gains in social status and community belonging.⁹¹ It has attracted defectors from the military and police by providing better pay.⁹²

IS-M's limited propaganda appeals to popular grievances and a desire among many young people to upend the existing order. Themes include enacting revenge against local police and mining companies'

private security forces,⁹³ positioning as defenders of the Muslim poor beyond ethnic and regional lines,⁹⁴ and possibly appealing to a sense of the lost Muslim rule on the Swahili coast.⁹⁵ IS-M members have criticized corruption and claimed to not be fighting for wealth themselves.⁹⁶ They have castigated the government for humiliating poor people and committing human rights abuses, positing fair Islamic governance as the solution.⁹⁷ IS-M messaging has also pushed back on the government's accusation that it is a foreign organization.⁹⁸

IS-M's control of terrain may also draw recruits, mirroring the effect of the Islamic State's caliphate in other theaters. There are reports of people traveling to Mocímboa da Praia in September 2020,⁹⁹ and some recruits traveled from Nampula province by sea.

IS-M also engages in large-scale forced recruitment, including group kidnappings of women and children. This practice increased notably in 2020. Children—male and female—are especially at risk in the wake of IS-M attacks as families separate while fleeing.¹⁰⁰ In late October 2020, insurgents detained over 200 people in Pangane in Macomia district, before separating children from their parents and forcibly taking them.¹⁰¹

Women and girls' role in harvesting and securing food can lead them to become easy targets for violence and make them essential in ensuring IS-M's food supply.¹⁰² Recent IS-M attacks have involved small-scale kidnappings of several women and girls at a time.¹⁰³ One unconfirmed estimate numbers 700 forcibly recruited women as of October 2020.¹⁰⁴ This pattern of forced recruitment in addition to potential voluntary participation aligns with other insurgencies in the region in which forced "marriage" to fighters is prevalent and women and girls play key support roles by performing agricultural and household duties.

The group has also targeted men who refuse to join its ranks, notably beheading more than 50 young men for this reason in April 2020.¹⁰⁵

Mass Displacement. An unusual feature of the IS-M insurgency is its high level of civilian displacement. More than 424,000 people are estimated to

be internally displaced in Cabo Delgado, Nampula, and Niassa provinces, the majority of whom were displaced in 2020.¹⁰⁶ In Cabo Delgado, internally displaced persons (IDPs) are concentrated in the southern districts where humanitarian organizations are still operating, following significant withdrawals in the wake of attacks on district capitals.

This population displacement could serve multiple purposes. IS-M may be displacing civilians to make it easier to hold territory. The group lacks strong social support and may see people as security risks who might organize among themselves or serve as government informants. Alternately, should IS-M seek to govern, mass displacement may be intended to limit the number of people under its control. In either case, mass displacement shifts the burden for maintaining popular support and basic services to the national government (and its international humanitarian partners) and may be intended to disrupt the government's ability to counter IS-M directly. Reports of IS-M paying civilians to leave in limited cases support a hypothesis that mass displacement is a strategic choice.¹⁰⁷

Holding territory can be valuable for its own sake. IS-M can control access in and out of that territory while accessing important resources and infrastructure left behind, such as homes and boats. Maritime access and the illicit networks that run through Cabo Delgado may make holding terrain sustainable and sufficiently lucrative to be an end in itself.

IS-M's displacement strategy may be intended to change the population's composition in Cabo Delgado and increase IS-M's control over the people who remain or return. Attacks on Christians indicate IS-M may seek to sort the population along confessional lines. The IDPs' composition is unclear, but the concentration of IS-M attacks along the coast may indicate the Muslim-majority Mwani community is targeted disproportionately even as IS-M seeks to recruit from them.

Some IDPs will return to Cabo Delgado eventually. IS-M may try to set conditions to control the returning population. Muslim civilians may be more likely to return, particularly if they face discrimination or repression from Mozambican security forces or local communities while displaced. In this scenario,

some populations are more likely to return and tolerate IS-M by necessity. Returning IDPs and civilians who stay in IS-M-controlled areas are at risk of being deemed "guilty by location" and further alienated from the Mozambican state.¹⁰⁸ This dynamic has hampered social cohesion in post-Islamic State Mosul, Iraq, for example.¹⁰⁹

Alternatively, mass displacement may be a product of poor command and control and general chaos rather than IS-M's strategic choice. Raids targeting civilians may indicate IS-M members or other armed cells and mobs are seizing food supplies that villagers cannot survive without. In some cases, militants are likely using villages as bases, removing the option for villagers to return. Reports of extreme violence, including beheadings and kidnappings, may have also heightened the sensitivity of local populations to the risk IS-M poses and prompted relocations in advance of attacks.

Governance. IS-M members have expressed a desire in propaganda videos to overthrow the Mozambican state.¹¹⁰ IS-M has not yet taken significant action to establish governance in the territory it controls, but its attacks on humanitarian and governmental infrastructure signal an effort to delegitimize national and local authorities by undermining the provision of already limited services.

Targets have included humanitarian agencies' medical facilities.¹¹¹ The group has also destroyed homes—demonstrating security forces' inability to protect civilians—and targeted administrative buildings, commercial property, and transportation infrastructure. IS-M has targeted schools and teachers, possibly indicating its intent to replace local education and indoctrinate a next generation of members. IS-M also targets rival religious authorities¹¹² and local traditions it deems un-Islamic, notably a male initiation ceremony in early November 2020.¹¹³

IS-M has taken limited steps to win popular support and mitigate backlash. It has warned civilians before attacks in some cases.¹¹⁴ IS-M could scale up an effort to win popular support in the future by increasing its handouts and programming for local populations and possibly co-opting humanitarian aid flows into the region. (Tanzania's government has

cited IS-M's ability to divert resources as the rationale for the government's restriction on food exports to Cabo Delgado.)¹¹⁵

The group may be setting conditions for a longer-term project of governance. In this light, displacement may serve an important sorting function by allowing the group to screen individuals for reentry.

It is also possible that IS-M has not delayed its plans for governance, but simply lacks them. The group's overarching strategy may not match its operational and tactical military skill. The group's leaders may simply have not put any thought into what it means to govern and whether this is necessary to its objectives.

The Mozambican Government's Challenges and Response

The Mozambican government faces several difficulties in mounting a response to the IS-M insurgency, including overlapping security and political challenges, institutional limitations, and resource constraints.

Intersecting National Dynamics. Political power in Mozambique remains divided between the FRELIMO government, which has been in power since independence, and the RENAMO opposition. Contention between the two parties is strongly tied to failures in integrating RENAMO fighters into the Mozambican military, as stipulated in the agreement that ended the country's civil war (1977–92). Conflict reemerged from April 2013 to August 2019, requiring another peace agreement and causing a splinter in RENAMO. The splinter group attacks economic and civilian targets in central Mozambique.¹¹⁶

Clashes with RENAMO have overlapped with the IS-M insurgency and hindered the Mozambican government's response in Cabo Delgado. President Nyusi struck a truce with the RENAMO splinter group in late October 2020 to allow government forces to concentrate their effort against IS-M in the north.¹¹⁷

The RENAMO challenge presents both risks and opportunities for the Mozambican government's

response to IS-M. IS-M may co-opt both current and demobilized RENAMO fighters, given their complaints about the paucity of the government's disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program. This recruitment is most likely to happen in Nampula, Niassa, and Zambézia provinces, which border Cabo Delgado and are where RENAMO has fought. RENAMO political leadership will also attempt to use the government's weaknesses in Cabo Delgado as a political cudgel and has been vocal in publicizing the military's human rights violations during counter-IS-M operations.¹¹⁸ Alternately, RENAMO combatants could be mobilized by the government to protect the communities where they operate. Some reporting suggests government-backed militias may be forming in response to the threat IS-M poses.¹¹⁹

Government Response to IS-M. The Mozambican government's response to IS-M reflects its limited resources and capabilities, competing priorities, and governance challenges.

A fundamental weakness is the relative size of the Mozambican armed forces. Counterinsurgency doctrine indicates that a counterinsurgent force needs to establish a ratio of one counterinsurgent per 50 inhabitants to be effective.¹²⁰ The population of Cabo Delgado is around 2.3 million, whereas the Mozambican military has about only 11,200 active personnel, a ratio of one to 205.

Setting aside the manpower challenge, the security force response to IS-M has failed to achieve enduring effects. Official reports of police and military actions tend to inflate their achievements. Security forces, including the national police force's Rapid Intervention Unit, responded to IS-M's first attacks in fall 2017 with a disarmament ultimatum in December 2017. Security forces also launched an air-sea raid on an insurgent stronghold in Mocímboa da Praia district later that month, after which officials claimed to inflict high casualties and restore order.¹²¹ The Mozambican army appears to have deployed a sustained presence to Cabo Delgado by June 2019.

The Mozambican security forces have preexisting weaknesses that limit their effectiveness in the

The Mozambican Government's Response to the Islamic State

Strengths

- Prior counterinsurgency and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration experience
- Willingness to request assistance
- Ownership of response

Weaknesses

- Limited capabilities
- Security-sector abuses and government corruption
- Political cleavages

country's north. Political factions exist in the armed forces and its senior leadership.¹²² Security personnel are also largely recruited from other parts of the country and sent to the remote north, which is the least desired posting for security personnel and civilian officials alike. Morale issues and defections have disrupted the response to IS-M.¹²³ IS-M's basic naval capability also poses a problem for the Mozambican navy, which has only 200 members and 11 patrol boats.¹²⁴ Lastly, the Mozambican government and its security forces suffer from contested legitimacy given the conflict with RENAMO.

The Mozambican government is attempting to compensate for its military weaknesses by hiring private security companies to provide unique capabilities. Russia's Wagner Group deployed in fall 2019 but quickly withdrew, having underestimated the difficulty of the terrain and IS-M's capability.¹²⁵ Moscow has been building ties to Maputo and may try again to trade counterterrorism services for economic access.¹²⁶ The Mozambican government has forged a more enduring partnership with Dyck Advisory Group (DAG), a South African private military contractor that provides air support in Cabo Delgado. DAG's air support has prevented some IS-M advances¹²⁷ but has not been decisive, particularly when Mozambican ground forces have been lacking. DAG has also been accused of firing on civilians.¹²⁸ IS-M attacks in November 2020 in Muidumbe and the fight for control of the Palma-Mueda road¹²⁹ may ultimately threaten the military base in

Mueda district, further limiting Mozambican-DAG operations.

Mozambican forces have been credibly accused of human rights violations against civilians in Cabo Delgado.¹³⁰ Reports of IS-M members wearing military uniforms complicate reporting on military and police violations, but they are likely to have occurred. Security force abuses have pushed civilians toward supporting insurgents in other conflicts¹³¹ and will undermine a counterinsurgency response to IS-M.

The EU granted Mozambique's request for security assistance in October 2020. The assistance will cover training logistics, technical training, and help addressing humanitarian and medical challenges. The assistance also stipulates that Mozambican forces make "verifiable commitments" to respect human rights and provide accountability.¹³² The risk of corruption from the influx of EU financial support¹³³ is high, and the opacity of a security pact with the energy company Total¹³⁴ suggests the government's accountability remains limited.

In a move away from accountability, the government plans to arm civilian vigilantes.¹³⁵ This strategy will likely encourage extrajudicial killings and attract retaliation against communities (as seen in Burkina Faso).¹³⁶ This strategy may already be rolling out: The military conducted a joint operation with a local militia comprised of FRELIMO veterans from President Nyusi's hometown.¹³⁷ Official sources have reported the killing of 270 IS-M members on October 16–18, but this figure is likely exaggerated.¹³⁸

Intersecting Regional Dynamics. Strong political linkages developed among Mozambique, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe during their respective struggles for independence and persist today. These countries could become active in the IS-M conflict and related instability in Mozambique. Mozambique's southern neighbor—South Africa—and regional political organizations may also become involved.

Tanzania. Tanzania served as the base for FRELIMO fighters during Mozambique's war of independence. Tanzania's ruling party has held power since its own independence in 1961. Magufuli, the incumbent, was declared the winner of the October 2020 presidential election two weeks after an IS-M cross-border attack on the village of Kitaya in Tanzania's Mtwara region.¹³⁹ Magufuli's postelection crackdown, which included the arrest of opposition leaders, reflects the government's preoccupation with maintaining its tight political grip. Tanzania's potential response to the IS-M conflict should therefore be understood in light of an emerging political opposition in the country.

The porousness of the 800-kilometer Tanzanian-Mozambican border and the long history of transnational insurgency along that border also inform responses to the current conflict, including deploying additional troops, evacuating civilians,¹⁴⁰ and banning food exports to Cabo Delgado.¹⁴¹ Further attacks in Tanzania will likely focus Magufuli's attention on internal opponents. Magufuli is an outspoken Catholic and likely to play into Islamic State "crusader" narratives. Nevertheless, the Tanzanian military is better trained and equipped and, should violence escalate significantly along the border, could play an important role in supporting Mozambique's counterinsurgency efforts.

South Africa. Apartheid-era South Africa positioned itself in opposition to FRELIMO, Mozambique's ruling party, and, along with minority-ruled Rhodesia, provided military support to the RENAMO insurgency. Relations have improved considerably in recent decades. Mozambique is economically dependent on South Africa, which serves as a major destination for

legal and illegal economic migrants. The South African company Sasol has invested in Mozambique's LNG sector.¹⁴²

South Africa has been noncommittal regarding potential military involvement in Mozambique. The country has sent a small group of special operations forces to Mozambique and appointed the former chief of the South African military as the country's ambassador.¹⁴³ South African officials have expressed concern over DAG's current role in Cabo Delgado.

The Islamic State's threat to attack South Africa should it intervene militarily in Mozambique may be contributing to the country's hesitancy. South Africa's role as a hub for terrorist financing on the continent also complicates its potential involvement.

Zimbabwe. Ties between Zimbabwe's ruling Zimbabwe African National Union and Mozambique's FRELIMO date to efforts led by Robert Mugabe to overthrow Rhodesia's white-ruled government. Zimbabwe has responded to IS-M by deploying more troops to its border. Zimbabwe has publicly called for regional support for Mozambique's counterinsurgency efforts,¹⁴⁴ allegedly in the hope that the United States would lift its sanctions on Zimbabwe. The country's economic crisis and recent political upheaval, however, make it ill positioned to lend more than rhetorical support.

African Union and Southern African Development Community. Regional institutions, including the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), have raised the possibility of military involvement in Cabo Delgado, with no firm commitments. Mozambique holds the presidency of the SADC and stands on the AU's Peace and Security Council. The AU's past counterterrorism efforts in Nigeria, Somalia, and the Sahel are not considered successful. Zimbabwe has called on the SADC to invoke its mutual defense pact and mobilize for a joint SADC-AU mission,¹⁴⁵ but the SADC has no legal basis—short of UN Security Council authorization—on which to undertake operations without Mozambique's consent.¹⁴⁶

II. Implications and Recommendations

The IS-M threat is growing, but worst-case outcomes are not inevitable. Preventing these outcomes requires an international effort.

Implications

This report identifies several implications should IS-M continue its current trajectory.

IS-M Is on Track to Establish a Lasting Foot-hold in Cabo Delgado Province. The Mozambican government is unlikely to sustain a military presence in Cabo Delgado due to security-sector deficiencies and competing priorities. A short-term surge in operations may push IS-M to temporarily withdraw from populated areas, including Mocimboa da Praia. Such a withdrawal should be expected and falls within both Islamic State guidance and prior IS-M decision-making to preserve its forces.¹⁴⁷

The government's approach risks stoking support for IS-M, particularly by arming vigilante militias, which has strengthened Salafi-jihadi groups in other countries.¹⁴⁸ Cabo Delgado will likely become a no-man's-land with some pockets of IS-M control over populations.

IS-M's economic base will likely strengthen the longer it stays in Cabo Delgado, if it survives the initial hurdle of disrupting the local economy with mass displacement. IS-M may begin to tax civilians who remain under its control or who ultimately return to the region.

IS-M may expand its area of operations into the neighboring provinces of Nampula and Niassa but not further because it would encounter more robust security forces and militias. But even with limits on its

territorial expansion, the IS-M insurgency will have damaging national and regional effects.

The IS-M Insurgency Will Worsen Political Instability in Mozambique. IS-M may attempt attacks intended to stoke political tensions in Mozambique, particularly if it needs an alternate means to disrupt military pressure on its stronghold. IS-M could feasibly adopt terrorism as a method to sow discord and retaliate against Mozambican counterinsurgency efforts. A terror campaign in central or southern Mozambique could cause political turmoil or even renewed conflict between Nyusi's government and opposition. IS-M's mass displacement of civilians may also be intended partly to strain and destabilize the Mozambican government to hinder a response in Cabo Delgado, which has historically been neglected by the Mozambican state. Should the IS-M conflict become a major national issue, the government's failure to address it could feed into political or even armed challenges against President Nyusi and FRELIMO.

Failure to Deal with the IS-M Problem Will Cripple the Mozambican Economy in the Future. The LNG development effort in northern Mozambique is the largest in Africa, and Mozambique has bet its economic growth on LNG revenues.¹⁴⁹ The combination of the COVID-19 downturn in oil prices and increased security costs and risks in Cabo Delgado are disrupting or delaying LNG development.¹⁵⁰ These disruptions will contribute to the further underdevelopment of northern Mozambique, ensuring that the country remains economically dependent on South Africa.

IS-M will continue to exert indirect pressure on Western economic projects in northern Mozambique

and will likely execute direct attacks if the security vacuum persists. Islamic State media has threatened such attacks.¹⁵¹ IS-M's nascent naval capability may become a threat to offshore LNG sites.

IS-M May Target Other Countries in Eastern and Southern Africa. IS-M's northward expansion is limited by the Tanzanian military's response, which is likely to be more effective than Mozambique's. However, there remains a risk that terrorist attacks in South Africa or deeper in Tanzanian territory could further internationalize what is now a geographically contained insurgency.

Tanzania. IS-M may use training camps inside Mozambique to support a sustained cross-border insurgency, possibly targeting energy infrastructure, or even to prepare terrorist attacks inside Tanzania. Tanzania faces a political crisis and will struggle to manage its border. While this crisis makes it unlikely that Tanzania will intervene in Mozambique, it also means terrorist attacks inside Tanzania may have a disproportionate effect. Any Tanzanian government response would crack down harshly, which could in turn feed more recruitment. Such a crackdown risks stoking Muslim populations' existing resentment to their perceived subjugation to a Christian-led system and could fuel a larger insurgency in Tanzania.

South Africa. The Islamic State has also threatened to attack South Africa should it intervene in Mozambique and has warned that a Mozambique conflict would become a quagmire for intervening states. South Africa's response to the Mozambique crisis has been posturing, and it is unlikely to intervene. In a dangerous but less likely scenario, the Islamic State could attempt to realize its predictions in Mozambique by pursuing an attack in South Africa, possibly using DAG's presence as justification to incite retaliation.

An IS-M terror attack in a neighboring country raises the risk of an overly militarized and counterproductive response. By provoking such a response, IS-M would fuel Mozambican backlash against external invasion and create a conflict in which foreign

forces are likely to become entrenched, to the benefit of the Islamic State's global narrative.

The Humanitarian Situation in Northern Mozambique Will Likely Worsen Security Conditions. Mozambique's increasing reliance on international humanitarian organizations reflects the state's weakness in the north and its precarious economic situation. More than 300,000 individuals are now completely reliant on humanitarian assistance in northern Mozambique.¹⁵² The concentration of the humanitarian response in Cabo Delgado's southern districts heightens the risk of attacks in these areas; any such attack would have a devastating effect on the provision of services to IDPs and force aid organizations to retreat further south. This would reinforce biases toward the economic development of southern Mozambique and eliminate what little service provision exists in the north.

The concentration of IDPs in district capitals is also increasing the risk of COVID-19 transmission.¹⁵³ Cabo Delgado is reporting the second-highest number of COVID-19 infections in Mozambique, and resettlement sites in the province lack personal protective equipment and temperature measuring devices.¹⁵⁴ At least 25 health facilities closed and hundreds of health workers fled the area due to insecurity.¹⁵⁵ Insecurity is also affecting other health outcomes, with efforts to control a cholera outbreak impeded by attacks. Sanitation problems will increase during the rainy season (November–April).

Failure to return IDPs to northern Cabo Delgado will have long-term human security implications. The degree to which the conflict has disrupted local agricultural cycles has yet to be determined. However, northern Mozambique will likely face significant food security issues over the next year and beyond depending on how rapidly IDP populations can return to their communities and resume subsistence farming and tending local small-scale agriculture and fisheries.

Failure to return IDP populations to their communities of origin may accelerate urbanization, complicating service delivery and further disrupting patterns of local economic activity. This may lead to the increased concentration of undereducated

and unemployed youths and expose them to other risk factors for radicalization.¹⁵⁶ As IDPs seek refuge in neighboring regions, local hostility toward them may also emerge as a factor influencing insurgent recruitment.

Recommendations

The IS-M insurgency is a solvable problem. The necessary response is smaller than what is needed to uproot more deeply entrenched Salafi-jihadi groups or wind down local conflicts that have become multilevel regional wars. But speed matters. The IS-M insurgency will become a more difficult and expensive problem if its course is not quickly reversed.

Returning security to Cabo Delgado and addressing the humanitarian emergency requires defeating IS-M, through either outright military defeat or a negotiated resolution involving a DDR process. Diplomatic engagement will be necessary to manage regional actors and prevent the spread of instability to new areas. An end to the conflict, however, will not mean an end to the crisis. Countering violent extremism (CVE) programming and a continued humanitarian response will be required to secure military gains.

This section proposes steps that a range of international actors can take to help the Mozambican government effectively resolve this multifaceted crisis through security, diplomatic, and humanitarian responses. Many of these recommendations are complementary, but each should be considered based on current conditions.

All international responses require a focus on accountability. The risk of corruption is increasing as the European Union and other actors take steps to support the Mozambican government. Financial and security support from the EU¹⁵⁷ and a security pact with the energy company Total¹⁵⁸ raise concerns about the Mozambican government's ability to effectively and transparently use an influx of financial resources given past corruption challenges.

Security Responses. The Mozambican government lacks the capability to defeat IS-M on its own. Its

military response, which relies heavily on private security contractors, stokes grievances that inflame the insurgency. Multilateral or bilateral security-sector support is needed to recapture and hold terrain from IS-M, ensure the accountability of security personnel, create exit pathways for IS-M combatants and affiliates, and prevent further radicalization.

Several international actors, including the EU, the US, and regional security organizations, are well positioned to provide security-sector support to the Mozambican government in countering the IS-M insurgency. The EU has pledged to provide specific training while US representatives in Mozambique have expressed a willingness to provide direct military support.¹⁵⁹

Recapture and Hold Terrain. Establishing security, at least in strategic areas, is necessary to create a platform for the nonmilitary efforts required for winding down the insurgency permanently. The Mozambican government's reliance on military contractors in the fight against IS-M reflects its military weakness, undermines much-needed accountability, and contributes to coordination problems. Yet, increasing the size and improving the Mozambican military's capabilities to the required level is unlikely, slow, and potentially destabilizing given the country's fragile political balance. Limited international military support is therefore necessary to help the Mozambican military secure baseline military objectives, such as recapturing the Mocímboa da Praia port and securing transportation and supply routes in Cabo Delgado.

Areas in which outside military support of Mozambican forces is likely to have a significant effect include:

- **Naval operations.** A basic naval mission could disrupt the IS-M shipments and attacks that are harming civilians and sustaining the group.
- **Counterterrorism operations.** Additional intelligence capacity and support in targeting IS-M's foreign leadership and international terrorism goals would reduce risk for several countries in the region.

- **Counterinsurgency operations.** Trainers and accompaniment for Mozambican forces would increase their capabilities while improving oversight. The gradual expansion of security in Cabo Delgado would also deny resources to IS-M and provide a platform for delivering governance and humanitarian services.
- **Peace support operations.** A peacekeeping force, possibly a joint UN-AU or AU-SADC mission, could play a key role in civilian protection in areas cleared of insurgents if Mozambique continues to struggle with its military capacity.
- **Border security.** Additional assistance to secure the Tanzanian-Mozambican border could include troops or civilian police support.

Other security-sector gaps that international actors can fill or support include battlefield evidence collection and chain-of-custody training and support in screening, detaining, and debriefing. The IS-M insurgency has highlighted challenges in policing that international assistance can help address.

Ensure Security-Sector Accountability. Reducing the Mozambican security forces' alleged human rights violations and ensuring accountability are essential to dialing down the insurgency. Foreign military advisers may disincentivize human rights abuses and encourage accountability for those who do commit abuses.¹⁶⁰ International peacekeeping forces can also play an important role as impartial observers, though they face the risk of perpetrating abuses or becoming the target of attacks and intimidation.¹⁶¹

Without international oversight, limited Mozambican command and control will likely enable continued abuses by security-sector forces. Additional private security actors such as the Wagner Group may also reenter the conflict and have destabilizing effects.

Governments and civil society actors should mobilize to encourage the Mozambican government to limit arming civilian militias¹⁶² so that they do not threaten civilians or incite cycles of violence along ethnic or religious lines. Subcontracting security to

vigilantes carries risks similar to those when relying on private military contractors, including limiting accountability while risking the mobilization of previously demobilized individuals. Vigilante groups that succeed against insurgents can become entrenched and resist demobilization or morph into predatory, quasi-criminal organizations or enemies of the central state.¹⁶³

Provide Exit Pathways. The government of Mozambique and its partners must effectively transition insurgents back to civilian life to achieve any lasting solution to the current conflict. They must simultaneously eliminate the unreconcilable component of IS-M that remains loyal to the Islamic State and create opportunities for others to leave the group. Treating the Cabo Delgado conflict as a traditional insurgency creates more opportunities for a lasting solution and emphasizes the local dynamics that have allowed a Salafi-jihadi insurgency to take root.

This approach requires identifying and isolating the IS-M leadership and prosecuting them. They are likely a small component of the estimated 1,000 combatants and possibly hundreds of affiliated individuals. Additional international support should focus on creating and implementing a DDR process to address the needs of reconcilable combatants and affiliated individuals, including women and children.¹⁶⁴

A DDR process brings many challenges. IS-M's insurgents are not all Mozambican nationals. Foreign fighters will need a separate exit strategy to facilitate their return to their home countries. If conflict continues, a related risk is former fighters later remobilizing after benefiting from a DDR process. Aggrieved individuals may perceive those who took up arms as having received undue privilege (i.e., cash incentives or job support) over the rest of the community.¹⁶⁵ Lastly, the IS-M insurgency's ideological component may require integrating CVE programs into a DDR effort.

Reports of IS-M's forced recruitment of children suggest a tailored child DDR process will also be required.¹⁶⁶ The international community should assist Mozambique in upholding its commitment to the UN Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of

the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict by supporting efforts to stem the recruitment of child soldiers by IS-M and vigilante groups and immediately developing a child DDR process.

Reintegration programs must address the conflict's effect on the individuals being demobilized *and* the local communities they come from. Therefore, a DDR process needs to be integrated with a broader IDP strategy, including resettlement. If the IS-M insurgency develops along clear ethnic and religious lines, it may become more difficult for communities to accept demobilized individuals, which means the sooner a process is put in place, the more likely it is to be effective.

Counter and Prevent Violent Extremism. Challenging the extremist ideology that has merged with local grievances in Cabo Delgado will require support for locally recognized and valued religious leadership in both the Muslim and Christian communities. The Mozambican government should consider partnerships with countries that have leveraged religious leaders for CVE programming, such as Jordan and Morocco. Academic research on Mozambique suggests religious approaches may be more effective than entrepreneurship or employment programming for individuals inclined toward extreme religious beliefs.¹⁶⁷

CVE programs need to take the role of economic drivers seriously, in addition to confronting extremist ideology. Reports that IS-M has used economic incentives for recruitment suggest that ideologically focused programming alone will be insufficient in addressing mobilization patterns.

CVE programs should be considered in not only Cabo Delgado but also neighboring provinces such as Nampula and Niassa, which support significant numbers of IDPs and may become target areas for IS-M recruitment and expansion. Radio-based messaging in local languages can help shift local attitudes toward IDPs and prepare communities to receive and reintegrate demobilized individuals.

Diplomatic Responses. International organizations and foreign governments with an interest in Mozambique's stability should focus on managing the

Potential Countering Violent Extremism Program Models

The following programs provide models that could easily be adapted for Cabo Delgado and neighboring provinces:

- The Niger Community Cohesion Initiative's (NCCI) first phase (2014–20) sought to strengthen youth resilience to violent extremist organizations, increase local leaders' effectiveness in addressing these threats, and prepare communities in the Diffa region for the reintegration of ex-combatants. The program supported reintegration awareness campaigns that reached approximately 27,700 people in 190 villages in Diffa. NCCI trained more than 1,000 leaders in the Tillabéri region, establishing nearly 300 peace committees that promote messages of peace and help mitigate threats at the community level.
- NCCI's second phase, which is ongoing (2020–21), seeks to build the government of Niger's capacity to deliver essential services and support to at-risk communities, especially at the village and commune level, while increasing state institutions' resilience to conflict and instability, including threats of violent extremism.
- The Cameroon Peace Promotion Project (2015–17) aimed to strengthen community cohesion in conflict-affected areas of northern Cameroon. The project used radio programming and community engagement to support moderate voices to mitigate extremist rhetoric, reinforce community values of peace and tolerance, improve access to factual information, and promote dialogue in vulnerable communities on conflict-related themes.

regional tensions exacerbated by the IS-M insurgency to prevent the conflict from becoming transnational.

Engage Diplomatically to Prevent Regional Conflicts. Multilateral organizations, including the EU, UN, AU, and SADC, have emerged as potential actors in response to the Cabo Delgado crisis. This list will likely grow to include the World Bank, African Development Bank, and other international development actors. Bilateral engagement with the government of Mozambique and neighboring countries is also a viable option. Interested countries and organizations should seize opportunities for engagement to prevent a transnational or regional conflict from emerging.

The United States should be prepared to engage through appropriate diplomatic channels should tensions rise between Mozambique and its neighbors, including around the issue of intervention in Cabo Delgado. Bandwidth constraints may arise in US agencies given multiple ongoing crises in eastern Africa and the 2021 presidential transition. The Joe Biden administration should ensure that the relevant offices and positions are adequately staffed to address concurrent challenges.

Calibrate an Appropriate US Response. US engagement regarding the IS-M insurgency will advance several objectives, including weakening the global Salafi-jihadi movement, contesting great-power rivals, addressing a growing humanitarian crisis, and improving regional coordination. China and Russia have only limited engagement in Mozambique but will likely seek closer ties given Mozambique's extensive coastline and natural resources. China is invested in Mozambique's natural resource sector but is unlikely to become involved militarily. Russia has demonstrated an interest in greater security involvement through high-level agreements and the deployment of the Wagner Group. The Wagner Group's withdrawal after a short deployment in 2019 may indicate bandwidth constraints, but a Russian return is also possible.

The United States is the largest bilateral donor to Mozambique, providing more than \$445 million in assistance annually. The United States can leverage its assistance to improve Mozambique's response

to the IS-M insurgency by supporting CVE programming, developing a long-term economic development plan, and encouraging improved human rights behavior by security-sector forces.

The US should also consider Mozambique as a candidate for access to long-term flexible funding under the recently passed Global Fragility Act (GFA). The GFA is an opportunity for the US to retool its foreign assistance for complex, fragile, and rapidly changing environments such as Mozambique, which the Salafi-jihadi movement and other US adversaries often exploit.¹⁶⁸

Any US strategy must recognize the challenges in the US-Mozambique relationship. Trust remains low among some circles given past US opposition to FRELIMO, historically a socialist party with ties to the former Soviet Union that still maintains security cooperation with Russia. The current crisis provides an opportunity to strengthen this relationship while building on more recent cooperation, including the US humanitarian response to Cyclone Idai in 2019. The US can also pursue improved relations with South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe as part of a crisis management approach.

Humanitarian Responses. A strong and effective humanitarian response is crucial to support broader security objectives.¹⁶⁹ The human toll of the current conflict has greatly exceeded the Mozambican government's ability to respond. President Nyusi's creation of the Integrated Development Agency of the North (ADIN) bodes well for future donor coordination, but its slow transition from paper to practice means humanitarian actors will continue to struggle with issues of coordination and access. International actors, ranging from UN agencies to donor governments to nongovernmental organizations, are needed to fill the gap by providing humanitarian relief to the hundreds of thousands of individuals displaced by IS-M's attacks.

Support the IDP Population and Facilitate Return. An effective IDP response is central to mitigating radicalization and recruitment by IS-M. Addressing the needs of the IDP population starts with ensuring its

physical security. IDPs should also receive psychological support, as victims of violence, and basic-needs services such as food and health care.

Local responses to the influx of IDPs in district capitals are hardening, and mistreatment may stoke radicalization among IDPs. The mayor of Pemba, a primary IDP destination, declared in October 2020 that no more land was available for temporary housing after an estimated 95,000 IDPs arrived in the city.¹⁷⁰ IDP-heavy Muslim neighborhoods in Pemba are at significant risk of radicalization due to security force violations. Nampula province, south of Cabo Delgado, is emerging as a new recruitment area among IDPs. Social cohesion programming, which stresses that a conflict affects *all* communities, can help manage tensions between IDPs and host communities. Such programming should bring together community leaders and IDPs to develop local solutions to community challenges.

Respond to Short-Term Needs with a Long-Term Strategy in Mind. The Mozambican government and its partners must identify and meet both individual and community needs to facilitate IDPs' return to their homes and productive economic activity as soon as the security situation permits.

Action is necessary to address economic drivers of conflict at individual and community levels. Reports of IS-M providing economic incentives for recruitment, including salaries and startup funding for small businesses,¹⁷¹ mirror similar patterns elsewhere in Africa.¹⁷² Participation in the IS-M insurgency provides economic opportunities that are significant enough to incentivize military and police defections.¹⁷³

Short-term actions must also consider the long-term effects of the economic dislocation that preceded the IS-M insurgency and that the insurgency has amplified. Continued concentration of service delivery in cities and towns in southern Cabo Delgado may cause the IDP population to remain and urbanize, with long-term implications for the security and social fabric of the rest of the province.

Cabo Delgado needs a long-term development plan that will allow its young population to find work that meets societal expectations. Such an effort requires a strategy to mitigate disruptions to traditional economic activity while recognizing that employment in the LNG industry is not a sufficient near-term option. The ADIN is a step in the right direction, but renewed attention must be placed on local development beyond the LNG sector.

Conclusion

What began as a narrow insurgency driven by economic grievances and religious tensions in late 2017 is now a regional concern, primed to draw in several of eastern and southern Africa's most powerful states. IS-M's growing capacity paired with problems internal to Mozambique has allowed IS-M to capture and hold territory in Cabo Delgado that has further enhanced its capabilities.

IS-M's foothold in Cabo Delgado provides a base for operations and potential attacks on neighboring countries. It poses a significant threat to the successful development of Mozambique's LNG industry and other economic interests in the province. The group's successes contribute to the continued legitimacy of the Islamic State and worsen political instability in Mozambique.

Increasing human rights violations by IS-M and several incidents by government forces have contributed to mass displacement in the province. The involvement of private security actors and government-backed vigilante groups poses a clear risk to civilians and may contribute to persistent cycles of violence.

Targeted international support for the Mozambican government's military response, the development of exit opportunities for IS-M combatants and affiliates, increased diplomatic engagement, and a strengthened humanitarian response can contribute to the resolution of this conflict. Ending violence and addressing its causes are necessary to prevent another Salafi-jihadi insurgency from becoming a permanent source of instability.

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The conclusions and assessments in this report do not reflect the positions of our technology partners.



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