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The Islamic State and Mozambique: Cause for concern

Background

Cabo Esquecido. Forgotten Cape. The name that is given to their province by the people of [Cabo Delgado](#) in northern Mozambique speaks volumes, as this remote location has been largely forgotten by the Mozambican government in terms of socio-economic and infrastructure development. That was, until [the discovery of gas in the area in 2010](#).

Enter ASWJ. *Al Sunnah wa Jama'ah*.¹ Translated from Arabic as meaning "[Adherents of the prophetic tradition and the congregation](#)", although in Islam this term refers to any Muslim. The short reference generally used is *Al Sunna*, or *Ahlu Sunnah*. The "original" *Al Sunnah wa Jama'ah* has its origins in Somalia since 1991.

In Mozambique *Al Sunna* has been active militarily since October 2017, when they first attacked the town of [Mocímboa da Praia](#), capital of the similarly-named district within the Cabo Delgado province. However, research indicates that they may have been active in the Cabo Delgado province [since at least 2015](#), albeit not under that name. There is in fact much speculation about the organisation's roots, and its links with the [Islamic State \(IS\)](#). Until recently (2018) strong suspicions emerged that *Al Sunna* shared stronger ties with [al-Qaeda via its Somalia branch](#) than with the IS. This was, amongst others, because the locals initially (pre-2017) referred to the bands of youths terrorising the area as *al-Shabaab*, similar to what the al-Qaeda affiliated organisation in Somalia is called. In Arabic, *al-Shabaab* simply means "the youth".

There can now however be little doubt that there is a formal association between *Al Sunna* and the IS, as happened with [Boko Haram](#) embracing IS in Nigeria and surrounds. What may have started out as an insurrection based on unfulfilled expectations and poor economic conditions suffered by the majority of the people in that region, has since been infiltrated by the IS for its own purposes with its regional off-shoot [ISCAP \(Islamic State Central African Province\)](#) having taken the credit for some of the Mozambique attacks. Since 2019 *Al Sunna* has also been brandishing the [IS flag](#) during their attacks.

Discussion

Essentially, the aim of [these insurgents' war is political, social](#) and economic. This means they are at least as political, as they are military. IS affiliates, as in the rest of Africa, often target impoverished groups where they can provide access to resources and in the process establish themselves as a "[legitimate](#)" [alternative to government](#). This is of course not a new phenomenon. Most insurgencies hark back to discontent among the

¹ Also read this analysis about the origins of ASWJ in Somalia, and references to the name: <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/ahlu-sunna-wal-jama>

population, deprivation, and government brutality - to name but a few reasons offering fertile grounds for a revolutionary mindset to take shape. One would think that [FRELIMO](#), given its history, would understand this better than most, so much then, for *Al Sunna*. However, one would be justified in questioning the strategic objectives of the IS in Mozambique.

[The IS history can be divided into four periods](#). The *first* period, from the 1990s to 2006, when led by al-Zarqawi, saw the group move from the training camps of Afghanistan to Iraq where it waged a sectarian insurgency. The *second* period from 2006 to 2010 was the establishment of its first self-declared state, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). It was a period characterised by the leadership of Abu Hamza al-Muhajir and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, who worked to rebuild the organisation. The *third* period spanned from 2011 to 2016 when the organisation changed its name to the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in 2013 and declared their caliphate.

The *fourth* period, from 2016 to today, is characterised by decline, as it lost all territorial control in Syria and Iraq and quickly settled back into a mode of conducting a long-running insurgency. Their operations in Iraq now seem to be aimed at establishing [control of rural areas with threats, attacks, burning crops](#), and forcing the populace to pay taxes. There is also an effort to establish training bases within the areas so depopulated.

In retrospect, the aim of establishing a caliphate was never going to be a major success and negated the very essence of how insurgency forces who rely on guerrilla tactics, should operate – by not providing static targets that are vulnerable to attack by conventional forces. They now seem to be rewriting the playbook and have resorted back to guerrilla-style operations, establishing regional provinces. In total, [nine IS-affiliated groups](#) are operating across Africa.

In Africa, the focus seems to also be a shift, albeit perhaps temporarily, from attacking hardened military targets, to focusing on rural areas and attacking civilians. Militant Islamist group attacks in Africa on civilians increased 47 percent since June 2019. [Violence against civilians](#) now represents 31 per cent of militant Islamist group activity in Africa compared to 17 per cent in 2017. In Mozambique, *Al Sunna* is linked to the largest share of attacks against civilians in the past year (78 per cent), followed by the Lake Chad Basin and the Sahel (42 per cent and 36 per cent, respectively).

Present IS-directed operations in Mozambique may be a microcosm of IS operations generally in Africa, characterised by mainly rural operations, intimidating the population, [extreme use of force](#), and depopulating large areas of the countryside for *inter alia* training purposes and recruitment. Indications of the use of more sophisticated systems in that country by *Al Sunna* are worrying. This includes the use of larger calibre weaponry, [drones](#), and small seaborne operations depicting elements of effective communications, coordination and command and control.

There is little doubt that the Islamic State's long-term aim remains the [establishment of a caliphate](#). The momentum that it is now building in Africa is focused on territorial expansion and recruitment and on "getting the message out." They will no doubt have learned their lessons in Iraq and Syria in this regard and may consider far-off territories better suited to their purpose; territories which may be of less perceived strategic consequence to big powers than Middle Eastern countries.

Their aggression is revealed by the [recent threats directed at inter alia South Africa](#). Here again one would do well to not approach the *Al Sunna*/IS view of the coming fight with a western mindset. No matter their technological or numerical inferiority, the IS mindset to fight the "Crusaders" is perhaps best summed up with this quote from [The Atlantic](#) in 2015, when they posted a very good investigative article on "What ISIS Really Wants:" During fighting in Iraq in December, after mujahideen (perhaps inaccurately) reported having seen American soldiers in battle, Islamic State Twitter accounts erupted in spasms of pleasure, like overenthusiastic hosts or hostesses upon the arrival of the first guests at a party.

Summary

There can be little doubt that *Al Sunna*, and hence IS, is increasing the [scale of its activities](#) in Cabo Delgado. The lack of proper security responses and the overreach in terms of asymmetry where security forces do respond, both point to a growing capabilities gap between the manifestation of the threat versus how it is being addressed.

As to Islamic State's strategic objectives, it seems to be regrouping and finding a new lease on life. It may well be that Mozambique is seen as an ideal platform for such a resurrection. Remoteness of the location, ineffective

government responses, the "bartering power" which the LNG project in the area offers, porous borders with Tanzania and other countries, and easy logistical supply and smuggling lines along the east coast of Africa make this an attractive locality for IS revival.

Finally, when the showdown does come, as it will, be it with an SADC or South African-only force, one would do very well to approach it with a less than a conventional mindset, euphemistically put.

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