

Policy Brief

Mozambique: A New Civil War?

By Hisham Aidi

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How did an insurrection in Northern Mozambique escalate into a crisis that is drawing myriad external actors, and risks destabilizing the region? What are the colonial and Cold War origins of this conflict in Cabo Delgado? Why is Rwanda such a prominent intervener? How are tensions between Kigali, Maputo and Pretoria playing out in the peacekeeping operation now underway?



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INTRODUCTION

On May 16, President Biden signed an order authorizing the American military to deploy hundreds of Special Operations forces to Somalia, and approved a Pentagon request to target suspected leaders of al Shabab. This measure reverses Donald Trump's decision to withdraw American troops from Somalia in December 2020. American officials have argued that, unlike the Taliban in Afghanistan, from where the US withdrew last fall, the Somali al-Shabaab group poses a "more significant threat" to the US, and has been making territorial gains.¹ East African leaders, on the other hand, seem to be more concerned with al-Shabab of Mozambique, the group (also known as Ansar al-Sunnah) which has launched a deadly insurgency in the northeastern region of Cabo Delgado.

In late April, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni suggested that a large Uganda force would be deployed to northern Mozambique. He said, "To have a group destabilizing Nyasa, Cabo Delgado, that's not acceptable. East Africa will have to do something like we have done in the Congo now."² Museveni may have a particular interest in the situation in Mozambique, given his personal ties to the country (he received training as a guerrilla fighter in Montpeuze in the 1970s.) But other states are looking to intervene in Mozambique, members of the 16-member South African Development Community (SADC), as well as Rwanda, France, Russia, the United States and the European Union. A recent paper published by the European Union's foreign policy organ, the European External Action Service (EEAS) declared that the European Union, which is already leading a two-year program to fortify Mozambique's army - may spend an additional twenty million pounds (in "non-lethal equipment") to help the Rwandan forces in Cabo Delgado "extend, protect and sustain the territorial and tactical gains they have made so far."³

The escalating crisis in northern Mozambique, has caught even seasoned Africa-watchers off guard. In 2017, local militants, supported by fighters from Tanzania, Somalia, and the Swahili coast, occupied the town of Mocímboa da Praia for two days; they would go on to attack small towns and army outposts. In July 2019, the group pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. What started as a limited insurrection has killed three thousand, displaced roughly 800,000 people, and has observers warning of a "new civil war."⁴ How did an insurrection spiral into a conflict that is drawing myriad external actors, and risks destabilizing the region? What are the colonial and Cold War origins of this insurrection in Cabo Delgado? Why is Rwanda such a prominent intervener? How are tensions between Kigali, Maputo and Pretoria playing out in the peacekeeping operation now underway?

COLD WAR LEGACIES:

Cabo Delgado, the impoverished and conflict-ridden northern province, was the base of Mozambique's war of liberation against colonial rule. When Mozambique gained independence from Portugal in 1975, leading figures of the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO), mainly Catholic Makonde officials, assumed high-ranking political positions in the northeast region and rewarded their allies with local administrative positions, while the

1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/16/us/politics/biden-military-somalia.html>

2. <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/museveni-regional-force-to-counter-mozambique-terrorist-threat-3799162>

3. <https://euobserver.com/world/154897>

4. <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/ignoring-the-roots-of-mozambiques-war-in-a-push-for-military-victory/>

largely Muslim Makua remained economically and politically disempowered. Over the next two decades, Makonde elites would enrich themselves through various economic ventures and smuggling networks (timber, ivory, precious stones). The Northeast region was unaffected by the civil war. When the two-decade civil war between the (now) ruling Marxist FRELIMO and the anti-Communist movement Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO), the latter historically backed by South Africa and Rhodesia, ended in 1992, the Makonde political class had solidified their hold over natural resources in the north. Frelimo-affiliated entrepreneurs with ties to the state used public loans to enter into forestry, mining, and business ventures, with the profits further strengthening FRELIMO's hold over the state apparatus.⁵ In response to the Makonde hold over the region's natural resources, a segment of the Makua community would remain sympathetic to RENAMO, with others gravitating to the Islamist insurrection.⁶

In 2009, a deposit of rubies was discovered in Montpuez, followed shortly by the discovery of large reserves of natural gas off the coast of Palma. Maputo's subsequent designation of Cabo Delgado as a region for mining and hydrocarbon initiatives would exacerbate tensions. In 2010, the government removed thousands of artisanal miners (Mozambicans, Tanzanians, and others) off land assigned for mining and hydrocarbon concession, further stirring up resentment among the local Makua population. According to a report from the International Crisis Group, the 2014 election that occurred during a ceasefire between the FRELIMO-dominant government and RENAMO, saw the former struggle to achieve an electoral victory.⁷ Gradually, many former miners, displaced by these concession projects, would join the military, and the discontent would slowly snowball.

IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINS:

Scholars continue to debate the political and ideological origins of the Shabab movement of Mozambique, with some pointing underscoring the rise of global Salafism in the 1990s. This camp holds that the Islamic Council of Mozambique, (CISLAMO), a pro-FRELIMO organization had sent young Muslims to study in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Sudan, just as Gulf states began building mosques and centers in northern Mozambique. In the mid-2000s, per this account, returning students began challenging both Sufi and CISLAMO religious authorities, distributing pamphlets, accusing religious teachers of hypocrisy, and trying to exclude girls from schools. As with other violent extremist movements, while one camp sees religious ideology as a driving factor (Habiba), others point to the political exclusion and material deprivation of the Makwe, exacerbated by the recent discovery of natural resources. Also, whether the Mozambican al-Shabab is connected to the eponymous Somali group is a point of contention, with one side pointing to pamphlets distributed by the Islamists in Cabo Delgado with the teachings of the late Kenyan cleric Abdou Rogo, associated with Somalia's Al-Shabab movement.⁸ Others find such links tenuous. Eric Mories Geraud has argued that the young Islamists initially withdrew from society, trying to build a separate Islamist counter-society, and only turned to violence once the state repressed them in 2016. He emphasizes that the state's crackdown came at the request of more mainstream Muslim organizations like CISLAMO.⁹

5. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/southern-africa/mozambique/b178-winning-peace-mozambiques-embattled-north>

6. https://www.academia.edu/69061883/The_past_in_the_present_memories_of_the_liberation_struggle_in_Northern_Mozambique

7. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/southern-africa/mozambique/303-stemming-insurrection-mozambiques-cabo-delgado>

8. https://www.iese.ac.mz/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/cadernos_17eng.pdf

9. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17531055.2020.1789271>

SHIFTING ALLIANCES:

In April 2021, Ansar al-Sunna militants attacked the town of Palma in Cabo Delgado province, leaving dozens of people dead.¹⁰ Palma is close to a natural gas project run by the French energy giant Total. (Total and Exxon Mobil are investing, respectively, \$20 billion and \$30 billion in Cabo Delgado.)¹¹ After the Palma attacks, Total and Exxon Mobil suspended their gas projects. In May 2021, Emmanuel Macron visited Kigali, Rwanda, and soon after, Kagame deployed troops to northern Mozambique as part of a United Nations peacekeeping operation.¹² Asked why Rwanda sent troops before SADAC, (the Southern African Development Community), the Rwandan leader quipped: “There’s a neighbor with a burning house and the one who arrives first is asked: why were you so quick to put the fire out?”¹³ As analysts ponder whether France is financing Rwanda’s military intervention to protect French interests in Mozambique, Kagame has presented the operation as a “Responsibility to Protect” initiative akin to similar interventions in Mali, Central African Republic or Haiti.¹⁴ (Worth recalling that Kagame has long presented himself as an ally in the War on Terror in Africa, assassinating suspected Islamist extremists.)¹⁵ Other analysts point to the bilateral cooperation agreement signed between Kigali and Maputo in 2018, which called for the opening of embassies and included a Memorandum of Understanding to promote trade.¹⁶ Rwanda’s interest in supporting the Mozambican government is also related to Kagame’s fear that Maputo could become a base for Rwandan dissidents and opposition figures.

In July 2021, shortly after Rwandan troops arrived, SADC launched SAMIM (the SADC Mission in Mozambique), deploying a force of mostly South African and Botswanian soldiers that would, in conjunction with the Rwandan forces, try to stabilize Cabo Delgado. The SADC Executive Secretary Stergomena Tax explained that the objective of the “Standby Force in support of Mozambique [was] to combat terrorism and acts of violent extremism in Cabo Delgado.” SAMIM’s mandate was extended in January of this year, following negotiations in Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi. SADC representatives extended the mandate of the mission. The South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, who chairs the SADC office on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation, declared that SAMIM had made “significant progress,” allowing “for some internally displaced persons to return to their homes and resume their normal lives.”

Over the past year, joint operations between SADC and Rwandan forces have gone relatively smoothly. It’s no secret that tensions have simmered between Pretoria and Kigali, about Kagame’s alleged assassination of Rwandan dissidents in South Africa and over election results in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.¹⁷ Maputo in turn, was receptive to Rwanda’s intervention, partly because Mozambican leaders view Kigali as a counter to South Africa, historically a hegemonic player in the region.

10. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/28/africa/palma-mozambique-ambush-intl/index.html>

11. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-exxonmobil-mozambique-Ing-exclusive-idUSKBN285326>

12. <https://newscentral.africa/2021/09/06/rwanda-denies-total-energies-france-funded-mozambique-operation/>

13. <https://www.gov.rw/blog-detail/rwanda-deploys-joint-force-to-mozambique>

14. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2022/04/01/les-bonnes-affaires-de-la-diplomatie-militaire-du-rwanda_6120178_3212.html

15. <https://apnews.com/article/37f38a17a8a140c39a20b15c5983068d>

16. <https://www.ktpress.rw/2018/07/rwanda-mozambique-sign-trade-skills-exchange-agreements/>

17. <https://mg.co.za/article/2012-08-19-sadc-slams-rwanda-for-drc-interference/>

SADC states have agreed to expand the SAMIM mission, but the initiative will now be upgraded from a Scenario 6 operation designed to downgrade al-Shabab's military capabilities to a Scenario 5 of "multi-dimensional peacekeeping," which would include building infrastructure and bureaucratic capacity. As South African Lieutenant Siphwe Sangweni stated, "Transitioning to Scenario 5 gives effect to peace support, and requires a larger effort and more feet on the ground," adding that the new approach would still allow for "attack and destroy" operations.¹⁸ Analysts concerned about Western intervention have noted that SADC's "robust" military operation was made possible by the European Union's financial support delivered through the African Union's organs.¹⁹

GREAT POWER INTERESTS:

The prominent role of France, the European Union, and the presence of American troops in Mozambique (since March 2021) and Somalia have revived the debate around Western counterterrorism in Africa. When the US, in March 2021 labeled the Ansar al-Sunna of northern Mozambique a "foreign terrorist organization," depicting the local conflict as a battle against ISIS, critics warned that such a framing risked further military escalation without any attempt to address the very local political-economic causes of the insurgency.²⁰ It's worth recalling that Western intervention in Somalia, Nigeria, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (the latter three are where French and American troops are both involved) has only worsened the situation. Thus Western military involvement in Mozambique is escalating just as scholars and analysts are drawing attention to the failure of the current counterterrorism thinking, which centers on fighting global jihad rather than fixing repressive, dysfunctional state institutions.

A leaked Pentagon report about the Special Operations Command Africa, which is responsible for "countering VEO [violent extremist organizations] in Africa, " stated that US Special Operations Forces have been active in Africa for almost two decades and have largely failed to achieve their missions, with violent extremist activity rising 43% in 2020 alone.²¹ Another report released by the Pentagon's Africa Center, notes a trend in African conflict theaters. "The surge in militant Islamist violence demonstrates the steady growth capacity among groups in each of the respective theaters over the last scenarios," reads the report. "Levels of militant Islamist violence continue on a steep upward slope."²² Chatham House, the London-based organization, drew a similar conclusion, alluding to Western involvement in the Sahel: "Success depends first and foremost on the willingness (much more than on the capacity) of corrupt leaders to reform and renew their social contract with citizens, especially in rural areas. International efforts will fail as long as impunity prevails and local armies can kill civilians and topple governments without consequence."²³ These critiques of the War on Terror policies should give pause to policymakers now calling for intervention in Mozambique.

18. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/africa/mozambique-s-battle-with-terrorism-hinges-on-unprecedented-co-operation-1.4855933>

19. <https://mg.co.za/opinion/2022-04-27-what-does-sadcs-new-military-approach-in-mozambique-mean/>

20. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/04/02/how-the-end-the-grievance-fed-insurgency-in-mozambique/>

21. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/4adzpb/secret-plans-detail-failures-of-us-commandos-in-africa>

22. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/spike-militant-islamist-violence-africa-shifting-security-landscape/>

23. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/03/rethinking-response-jihadist-groups-across-sahel/07-conclusion-end-military-cooperation>

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Hisham Aidi focuses on cultural globalization and the political economy of race and social movements. He received his Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University and has taught at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), and at the Driskell Center for the Study of the African Diaspora at the University of Maryland, College Park. He is the author of *Redeploying the State* (Palgrave, 2008) a comparative study of neo-liberalism and labor movements in Latin America; and co-editor, with Manning Marable, of *Black Routes to Islam* (Palgrave, 2009). In 2002–2003, Aidi was a consultant for UNDP's Human Development Report. From 2000 to 2003, he was part of Harvard University's Encarta Africana project, and worked as a cultural reporter, covering youth culture and immigration in Harlem and the Bronx, for *Africana*, *The New African* and *ColorLines*. More recently, his work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The New Yorker* and *Salon*. Since 2007, he has been a contributing editor of *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Culture, Politics and Society*. Aidi is the author most recently of *Rebel Music: Race, Empire and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (Pantheon, 2014), a study of American cultural diplomacy. Aidi teaches the SIPA MIA survey course *Conceptual Foundations of International Politics* and seminars in SIPA's summer program.

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the author.

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