

Mozambique: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

On August 12, 2020, Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jammah (ASWJ) insurgents ambushed villages in the port of Mocímboa da Praia. The ISIS-affiliated insurgents managed to overtake government troops and seize control of the area. The move is strategic as the port is pivotal in the transit of oil and gas equipment. Mozambique's government, however, is ill-equipped to counter the growing number of radical insurgents. Additionally, there have been reports that Mozambique's security forces have fled scenes of insurgent activity as the number of insurgents greatly outnumbers security forces in the area. (Sources: [Human Rights Watch](#) [1], [Wall Street Journal](#) [2], [BBC News](#) [3])

Overview

Although the jihadist threat has been growing in Mozambique for over two decades, the country experienced a significant rise in the number of terror attacks following the discovery of gas and other natural resources in the area. In 2010, the United States energy company, Anadarko, discovered large gas reserves in the Rovuma basin deep in the Indian Ocean, and in 2011, the Italian energy company, ENI, also discovered significant gas reserves in the area. These discoveries have attracted international capital and have positioned Mozambique to be one of the next big gas suppliers for the global market. However, the exploitation of natural resources by international companies has exacerbated inequitable conditions for the local community as many Mozambicans have been forcibly displaced and inadequately compensated. Insurgent groups have leveraged local grievances and placed themselves as an alternative to the current government, which has prioritized economic gain. (Sources: [Chatham House](#) [4], [Observer Research Foundation](#) [5])

Terrorist activity in Mozambique has been on the rise since 2017, with more than 1,000 civilians killed since the onset of violence as of August 2020. The local insurgency Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jammah (ASWJ)—also referred to as al-Shabaab—has focused most of its attacks near Cabo Delgado. Although sometimes referred to as al-Shabaab, ASWJ is not associated with al-Shabaab that is based in Somalia. However, jihadist activity has significantly increased since June 2019, as ISIS's affiliate in Mozambique—the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP)—has begun to regularly carry out attacks in northern Mozambique and Tanzania. As of August 2020, ongoing violence has contributed to the displacement of almost 200,000 others. (Sources: [ACLEDD](#) [6], [Chatham House](#) [4], [Voice of America](#) [7])

In May 2018, a photo was shared on a pro-ISIS Telegram channel that showed fighters in front of a black and white ISIS flag. ASWJ fighters issued a statement accompanying the photo claiming that an official pledge of allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi would follow. It was not until 2019 when ASWJ was officially incorporated into ISCAP. The Mozambican government originally dismissed the threat of the local insurgency by claiming assailants were merely criminals unaffiliated with any larger network but has shifted their approach throughout 2020. The government has reportedly begun to hire foreign security contractors from countries such as Russia, the United States, and South Africa but violence continues to overtake the southern African country. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [8], [Defense Post](#) [9])

Radicalization and Foreign Fighters

Since 2017, Mozambique has seen a steady rise in terrorist attacks which have primarily been limited to the northern region of the country, particularly Cabo Delgado. The province's population is majority Muslim but historically of the Sufi strain. According to scholars at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), a new wave of radical Islam began to take hold in Cabo Delgado in 2014 and 2015 when radical preachers from nearby Tanzania, as well as radical imams from Kenya, Uganda, Somalia, and the Congo, began proselytizing in northern Mozambique. Their ultra-conservative message resonated with Mozambique's disenfranchised youth, which laid the groundwork for Mozambique's current insurgency. As a new sect of radical Islam, that was locally referred to as Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jammah (ASWJ), began to form in the area, prospective members became more interested in the group's teachings as small financial loans were promised if individuals pledged loyalty to the sect. IISS scholars suggest that militant training has been a part of ASWJ's modus operandi since its founding, but there are no reports suggesting if militant training has been leveraged as a way to eventually allocate Mozambican fighters into larger insurgencies across the world. (Sources: [Lawfare Blog](#) [10], [International Institute for Strategic Studies](#) [11])

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Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jammah (ASWJ)

The primary insurgent group in Mozambique is called Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jammah (ASWJ) or Ansar al-Sunna and is locally referenced as al-Shabaab. However, the group does not have any known affiliations with al-Shabaab in Somalia. Despite reportedly being founded in 2008, very little is known about ASWJ's leadership or the group in general. Some scholars claim the group evolved into the current movement from exacerbated public grievances—such as continued poverty and inadequate protection by Mozambican security forces in response to the growing insurgency—as well as the spread of Salafist ideology from as early as 2015. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, ASWJ's primary sponsors were followers of Sheikh Rogo—a radical imam who was sanctioned by the United States and United Nations in 2012 for providing support to al-Shabaab in Somalia. Following Rogo's death, several of his followers moved to northern Mozambique. However, some reports claim that ASWJ is allegedly dually led by a Gambian named Musa and a Mozambican named Nuro Adremane. Adremane had reportedly trained in Somalia along with other recruits. Musa, however, is known as a key recruiter throughout the Montepeuz District who has tapped into the aggrieved public that has been negatively affected by the increased presence of international oil companies and who feel inadequately protected by the national police. (Sources: [Africa Center](#) [12], [Babel Street](#) [13], [Council on Foreign Relations](#) [14])

ASWJ espouses a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. The spread of Salafi ideology has stemmed from many ASWJ members who have previously received scholarships to study abroad at Wahhabi madrassas throughout the Persian Gulf region and who then exported the teachings back to Mozambique. Those students who returned from studying abroad then developed separate mosques throughout northern Mozambique to propagate a more conservative practice of Islam. The Islamism practiced by ASWJ dramatically differs from the Sufi-inspired Islam that has traditionally been associated with the region. According to the Jamestown Foundation, ASWJ founded two mosques in Mocímboa da Praia which were shut down by police in May 2017 due to the onset of the jihadist threat. (Sources: [Africa Center](#) [12], [Small Wars Journal](#) [15])

ASWJ allegedly pledged allegiance to ISIS in May 2018 and was incorporated into Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) in 2019. The first instance of ASWJ demonstrating loyalty to ISIS occurred in May 2018 when a pro-ISIS Telegram channel shared a photo of Mozambican fighters in front of a black and white ISIS flag. Although the group claimed they would release an official bayah, or pledge of allegiance, to ISIS shortly after the May 2018 photo was posted, no official pledge was ever circulated. However, the group's activities have been shared on pro-ISIS Telegram channels and have been lauded by ISIS central. The insurgency includes local Mozambicans as well as militants from Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. ISCAP first claimed an attack in the Cabo Delgado province in June 2019, issuing a statement that stated the group was involved in a gunfight with and had ultimately seized weapons and ammunition from Mozambican military forces. Throughout 2020, the group—which has yet to clearly define its exact agenda in Mozambique—has begun to continually carry out attacks in the region. The militants carry out assaults that include seizing government buildings, blocking roads, and positioning the black and white ISIS flags throughout provinces such as Cabo Delgado. In terms of the attacks, insurgents regularly burn down entire villages and behead villagers who defy militant movement. (Sources: [Jamestown Foundation](#) [16], [Defense Post](#) [9])

ASWJ violence is often publicized by ISIS, as ISIS's official news sources, such as Amaq News Agency, Nashir News Agency, and the newsletter Al-Naba, have lauded Mozambique's fledgling insurgents. ASWJ continues to demonstrate its capacity as a legitimate threat to Mozambique's social and political security as it continues to gain attention from ISIS as well as possibly increase its communication network with ISIS central. It is not yet determined if ASWJ has received direct funding or training from more established ISIS cells. However, given the increasing volume of ASWJ-claimed or ASWJ-suspected attacks in the country, analysts at data analytics company Babel Street believe it is possible the insurgency has a growing network of external supporters. Additionally, although ASWJ primarily targets villages, they have started to take on Mozambique's security forces a lot more readily and have begun to integrate the use of drones for position scouting into their operations. As recently as May 2020, the group captured an armed vehicle from Mozambican security forces through their use of high-powered weapons such as rifles and mortars. Their increasingly destructive attacks demonstrate the possibility of transnational training among ISIS camps given that ASWJ's recent attack tactics have been employed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria for years. ASWJ often targets and launches retaliatory attacks against villages with villagers who have previously resisted cooperating with or have tried to fight off insurgent efforts. (Sources: [Babel Street](#) [13], [Defense Post](#) [17])

Since March 2020, ASWJ has sporadically taken control of the port town of Mocímboa da Praia, which hosts multiple foreign energy companies taking on lucrative gas projects in the area. Although security forces were previously able to

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overtake the insurgents, since January 2020, the quickly growing number of jihadists has overwhelmed Mozambique's security sector. Mozambique's government, police, and army are poorly equipped to adequately counter the militants and have been reported to have even fled scenes of insurgent activity. (Source: [The Soufan Center](#) [18])

Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents

- **September 12, 2020:** Suspected militants ambush two vehicles in Pundanhar, Cabo Delgado Province. The attack reportedly kills two. Source: [Garda World](#) [19]
- **August 30, 2020:** Suspected rebels ambush a passenger bus in Muxungue-Save area, Sofala province. The attack injures two. Source: [Garda World](#) [20]
- **August 12, 2020:** ASWJ insurgents ambush villages in the port of Mocímboa da Praia. The insurgents manage to overtake government troops and seize control of the area. The move is strategic as the port is pivotal in the transit of oil and gas equipment. Sources: [Human Rights Watch](#) [1], [Wall Street Journal](#) [2], [BBC News](#) [3]
- **July 30, 2020:** ASWJ insurgents ambush Tandacua village in northern Mozambique. The attack kills nine. Source: [Voice of America](#) [21]
- **July 13, 2020:** A pro-ISIS media foundation publishes a poster in which it celebrated the increase in ISIS operations in Mozambique and called on ISIS supporters and "lone wolves" to carry out attacks against Western companies. Source: [Middle East Media Research Institute](#) [22]
- **June 27, 2020:** ISCAP militants ambush Mocímboa da Praia. The attack kills at least 48. The insurgents targeted the port town as it represents a "crucial logistical hub for economic activity and humanitarian relief for the northern part of the province." Source: [France24](#) [23]
- **May 12, 2020:** ASWJ militants target Koko and Nacate villages in Cabo Delgado. The insurgents burn down at least 47 houses. It is unreported if there are any casualties in the attack. Source: [Club of Mozambique](#) [24]
- **April 7, 2020:** A jihadist group launches an attack on Xitaxi village, in northern Mozambique. The attack kills 52. According to reports, locals were massacred following their refusal to join the extremist group. Sources: [Arab News](#) [25], [Guardian](#) [26]
- **March 23, 2020:** Islamist insurgents ambush army barracks in Mocímboa da Praia. The attack wounds dozens. The assailants manage to occupy part of the town and some of the army barracks. Source: [Reuters](#) [27]
- **February 19, 2020:** Islamist militants attack military posts at Chiculua and Nanquidinga villages. The attacks kill seventeen. Source: [International Crisis Group](#) [28]
- **February 3, 2020:** Islamist militants ambush two villages in Quissanga district. The attack kills 12. Source: [International Crisis Group](#) [28]
- **January 23, 2020:** Islamist militants carries out an attack on a military base in Mbau. The attack kills at least 22 soldiers. Source: [International Crisis Group](#) [28]
- **December 24, 2019:** Unidentified gunmen attack three vehicles in Sofala province. The attacks kill at least 10 people. Source: [International Crisis Group](#) [28]
- **December 6, 2019:** Islamist militants ambush a military convoy in Narere village. The attack kills at least nine soldiers. Source: [International Crisis Group](#) [28]
- **November 12, 2019:** Unidentified militants attack Lucamba village, Nangade district. The attack kills eight. Source: [International Crisis Group](#) [28]
- **November 2, 2019:** Suspected Islamist militants attack Mumu village, Cabo Delgado. The attack kills four. Source: [International Crisis Group](#) [28]
- **October 27, 2019:** ASWJ militants ambush and kill five Russian mercenaries in Muidumbe, Cabo Delgado. Source: [Moscow Times](#) [29]
- **October 10, 2019:** Insurgents ambush Russian soldiers in Cabo Delgado. The attack kills two. Source: [Moscow Times](#) [29]
- **September 10, 2019:** ASWJ members launch two attacks in Muidumbe and Macomia Districts. The attack kills eight and results in the kidnapping of four women. The assailants burned down over 70 houses and a hospital. Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [30]
- **August 27, 2019:** Unidentified militants attack Quelimane village, Mocímboa da Praia. The assailants behead two. The same day, unidentified assailants also behead five fishermen in Macomia district. Source: [International Crisis Group](#) [28]
- **July 3, 2019:** ISCAP launches an attack in Lidjungo village, Nangade District. The attack kills seven. Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [30]
- **June 4, 2019:** ISIS claims its militants attack the Mozambican army in Mitopy, Mocímboa da Praia. The attack kills at least 16 and wounds 12 others. The insurgents also claim to have captured weapons, including rocket-propelled grenades from the military. The police refute ISCAP's claims. Source: [International Crisis Group](#) [28]

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- **February 21, 2019:** Unidentified insurgents attack a convoy associated with Anadarko Petroleum Corporation between Mocímboa da Praia and the Afungi Peninsula.
The attack kills one contractor. Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [30]
- **January 19, 2019:** Suspected ASWJ militants attack Manila village in Mocímboa da Praia.
The attackers behead four people and injure five others. Source: [Organization for World Peace](#) [31]
- **November 27, 2018:** Suspected jihadists attack Cabo Delgado.
The attack kills one and injures one other. Sources: [Garda World](#) [32], [U.S. Department of State](#) [33]
- **November 22, 2018:** Terrorists attack Chicuaia Velha, setting fire to over 40 homes.
The attack kills 12. Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [33]
- **September 21, 2018:** Suspected ASWJ militants ambush Paqueue village in Northern Mozambique.
The attack kills 12 and injures another 15. Source: [Defense Post](#) [34]
- **June 12, 2018:** ASWJ militants attack Nothuko village.
The militants behead one man and burn down at least 100 homes. Source: [Human Rights Watch](#) [35]
- **May 27, 2018:** ASWJ militants carry out an attack in Monjane, Cabo Delgado.
The assailants behead over 10 villagers. Insurgents targeted the village as the village chief reportedly provided information to the police about al-Shabaab's hideout in the forest. Source: [BBC News](#) [36]
- **May 20, 2018:** Suspected terrorists open fire on a passenger bus between Mapula City and Mocímboa de Praia.
The attack kills one. Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [33]
- **April 22, 2018:** South African newspaper, *Lowvelder*, alleges that at least 90 ISIS militants have infiltrated northern Mozambique.
Allegedly, some of the fighters are from Tanzania. Source: [The Organization for World Peace](#) [31]
- **April 21, 2018 - April 22, 2018:** Suspected Islamist militants attack two villages near Mocímboa da Praia and Palma.
The attacks kill one and wounds three others. Source: [Garda World](#) [37]
- **January 28, 2018:** A video is posted on social media encouraging people to join the fight for Islamic values and establish Islamic law as the law of the land.
In the video, unidentified six men are speaking to the audience. The video is both in Portuguese and Arabic. Source: [The Organization for World Peace](#) [31]
- **January 13, 2018:** Suspected ASWJ militants attack a market and government administrative building in Olumbi town, Palma district.
The attack kills five. Source: [The Organization for World Peace](#) [31]
- **November 29, 2017:** Suspected ASWJ militants attack Mitumbate and Maculo villages.
The attacks kill two and injure at least four others. Additionally, the militants destroy over 27 homes and a church.
Source: [Garda World](#) [38]
- **October 10, 2017:** Police in Mocímboa de Praia arrest 52 suspects after two days of attacks on police stations.
The attack kills two officers and one civilian. The suspects are allegedly homegrown extremists. Source: [News24](#) [39]
- **October 5, 2017:** A group of 30 militants attack three police stations in Mocímboa da Praia, the attack kills 16.
Local sources claim the attacks were carried out by ASWJ. Source: [Institute for Security Studies](#) [40]

Domestic Counter-Extremism

On March 10, 2019, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the government of Mozambique carried out a three-day workshop supported by the Canadian government to address the growing threat of violence in northern Mozambique. The workshop included key investigators, defense officials, prosecutors, and judges to discuss current strategies as well as develop new strategies to counter violent extremism as well as bring terrorists to justice. The training workshop was one of three workshops carried out in 2019 that sought to better equip local authorities with the practical methods and practices to combat the ongoing threat. To further demonstrate the country's commitment to preventing and monitoring extremism, Mozambique established a new Counter-Terrorism Unit within the National Criminal Investigation Service (SERNIC) to help better address and prosecute terror related crimes. (Source: [UNODC](#) [41])

Although Mozambique does not have a national action plan to implement countering violent extremism, as of November 2019, the government initiated discussions on a five-year action plan to deter youth from engaging in terrorism. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [30])

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security

Mozambique passed counterterrorism legislation in 2018, which provides for the punishment of anyone committing, planning, preparing, or participating in terrorist acts. The legislation also outlines punishment for individuals who have

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traveled or attempted to travel to join a terrorist organization. As of July 2019, the central government has reported over 130 convictions related to violence. However, these prosecutions were treated as assaults, murder, or arson and were not tried as terrorist acts. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [30])

Although Mozambique's Muslim population only totals around 19 percent of the total population, the province where ASWJ operates—Cabo Delgado—is majority Muslim. Northern Mozambique is still fine tuning a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy to offset jihadist violence. Local authorities still lack the necessary training, equipment, and capacity to proactively prevent the spread of extremism and radicalization. Mozambican law enforcement entities such as the national police force and the Rapid Intervention Unit operate within a joint task force with the military, but interagency cooperation in terms of intelligence sharing and strategy coordination has yet to be fully realized. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [30], [Lawfare Blog](#) [10])

Furthermore, border security remains an issue as terrorists can easily cross the border into and out of Tanzania. Tanzania has proven to be a recruitment and transit point for terrorist and criminal organizations. However, Tanzanian and Mozambican police forces have reaffirmed their commitment to working together to prevent extremists from traveling into and out of countries. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [30])

On September 3, 2020, South African Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor told a parliamentary committee that the southern African regional body, Southern African Development Community (SADC), had asked Mozambique to provide information on the assistance it would need to counter its growing insurgency. South African officials claim the country will readily supply intelligence or military services to its neighbor if the government of Mozambique makes a formal request for assistance. (Source: [Reuters](#) [42])

Countering the Financing of Terrorism

Mozambique is a member of the Eastern and Southern Africa Anti-Money Laundering Group (ESAAMLG). ESAAMLG members coordinate with one another to combat money laundering by implementing the Financial Action Task Force's recommendations. Mozambique is also a member of the Asset Recovery Inter-Agency Network for Southern Africa (ARINSA) which is an informal multi-agency network that allows participating members to exchange information, model legislation, and country laws in asset forfeiture, confiscation, and money laundering. (Sources: [ESAAMLG](#) [43], [UNODC](#) [44])

International Counter-Extremism

Mozambique is a member of the African Union and the Southern African Development Community but has not actively engaged in counterterrorism efforts with the two organizations. Mozambique is a member of the Partnership for Regional East Africa Counterterrorism (PRACT). The PRACT strategy is a multi-sector long-term initiative that seeks to strengthen civilian and security sector institutions to consistently offset the spread of violent extremism. Mozambique also has security cooperation Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) with regional and international partners. Partner countries include Malawi, India, Russia, Tanzania, Uganda, and the United Kingdom. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [30], [U.S. Department of State](#) [45])