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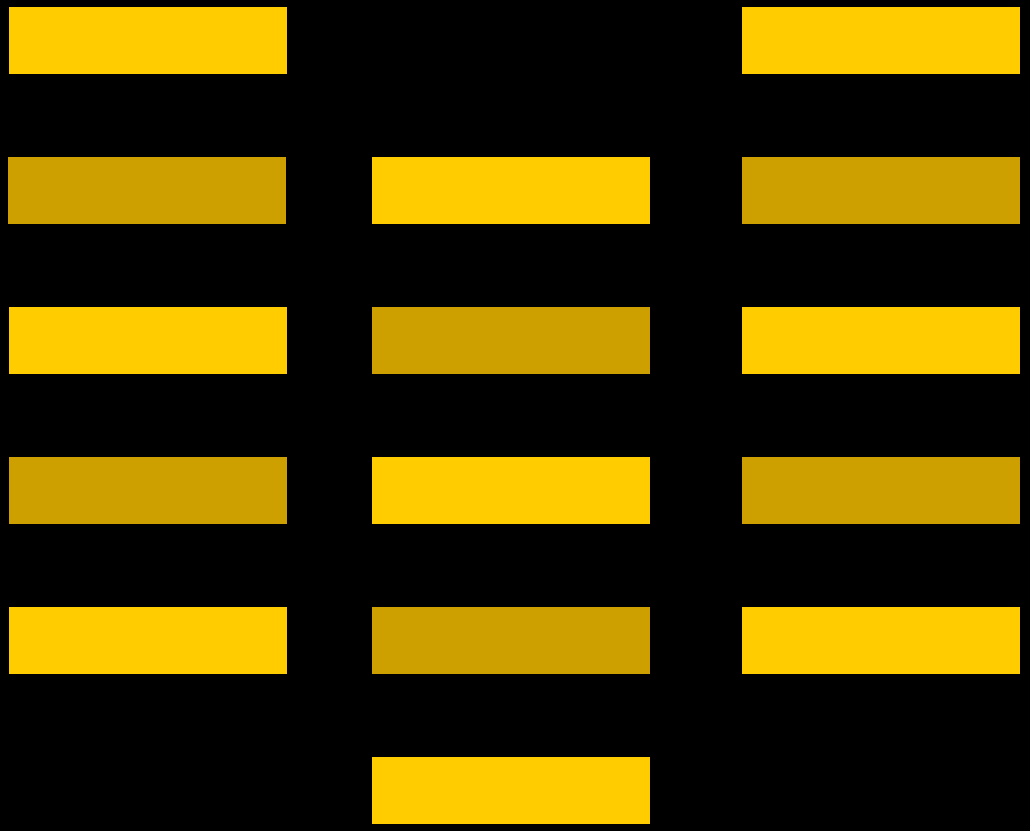


The Islamic State in Mozambique: A Profile

September 2021

Contents

Executive Summary

Context

In March 2021, militants associated with the Islamic State's affiliate in Mozambique – which is known locally as al-Shabab (not to be confused with the Somalia-based al-Qa'ida affiliate) but in official Islamic State nomenclature as part of Wilayat Wasat Ifriqiyya (aka Central Africa Province or ISCAP) – launched an assault on the coastal city of Palma in the country's northern Cabo Delgado province, temporarily seizing control of it. Coming just weeks after ISCAP's formal designation as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the United States government, the scale and outcome of the attack surprised policymakers the world over, once more bringing the northern Mozambique insurrection to the forefront of global counter-terrorism discourse.

In the months since, both Palma and the city of Mocímboa da Praia, which was IS-M captured in August 2020, have been cleared of insurgents. However, contemporaneous with their retreat has been a steep increase in both official and supporter-produced Islamic State propaganda focusing on Mozambique, something that indicates its continuing – or even increasing – importance to the overarching Islamic State brand.

Deploying the full range of qualitative and quantitative tools and datasets at ExTrac's disposal, this report gives a detailed overview of the Islamic State's influence and activities in Mozambique, setting out its origins, objectives, and likely future trajectory in the country.

Key Findings

The analysis, which refers to al-Shabab/ISCAP as IS-M to avoid confusion with other similarly named groups, is broken into four parts:

Section 1 traces IS-M's origins and evolution. It shows that:

The appeal of IS-M is tripartite, based along socio-political, economic and ethnic lines. The extent to which the Islamic State' jihadist ideology plays a role in local mobilisation remains to be seen, but its apparent buy-in to the conflict is an important regional draw.

Cabo Delgado's considerable resource wealth and skewed political demographics provides IS-M with a powerful argument for enlistment – i.e., that only it can right the socioeconomic wrongs through which Sunni Muslims in the region (especially but not only the Mwani community) have long been suffering.

While IS-M is nominally part of ISCAP, questions remain as to the precise nature of its relationship with the Islamic State, questions that place both parties in a position of vulnerability which can be exploited through strategic communications programming.

Section 2 assesses IS-M's operational trajectory over the course of the last few years, identifying three distinct phases in its military campaigns and strategising. It shows that:

Since 4 June 2019, the day that IS-M's first attack was reported via the Islamic State's official communications network, it has claimed some 57 unique operations in the region. While useful indicators of activity, these claims only tell us a small part of the story. Indeed, when cross-checked against verified data, there is a 94 percent differential between what IS-M is officially reporting from Cabo Delgado and what could feasibly be attributed to IS-M in Cabo Delgado.

IS-M's operational trajectory since 2019 can be cleanly divided into three periods. The most recent, which spanned the five weeks between 23 June 2021 and 29 July 2021, saw IS-M reporting operations at a rate that far outstripped previous communications dynamics. Indeed, 15 of the 16 attacks it has claimed in 2021 were reported in that single five-week period.

This surge in official reporting appears to have been tied to its attempted defence of Mocímboa da Praia, even though none of the attacks claimed was in its vicinity. Rather, the spike in output appears to have been an attempt by IS-M to signal that it was still active, aggressive, and capable, even as it was on the cusp of losing control of what was then its most important strategic holdout.

Section 3 focuses on IS-M's outreach capabilities. It shows that:

IS-M recruits through both coercive and persuasive activities depending on whom – and where – it is trying to recruit. In Cabo Delgado, from which the majority of its fighters hail, it acquires new members through a range of socioeconomic and ideological appeals as well as mass kidnappings, the latter of which target male and female children and adolescents and women especially.

Since its declaration in 2019, the Islamic State has published 85 IS-M-focused pieces of content, 73 of them appearing as official products of the Wilayat Wasat Ifriqiyya Media Office. Specifically, this output has comprised: 55 attack claims, 18 photo-reports, nine A'maq reports, and three videos. IS-M's content during this period has been almost entirely military in focus.

All IS-M content appears first on the Islamic State's closed network on Telegram and is Arabic-language at the point of dissemination. Regional sympathisers subsequently translate it into Swahili and other local languages before republishing it on Facebook and WhatsApp.

Section 4 explores how IS-M is perceived by supporters of the Islamic State online. It shows that:

Most discussion of IS-M's exploits focuses on one of two lines of discourse: i) commentary and analysis regarding its military exploits and successes, and ii) efforts to blend IS-M's local political objectives with the loftier ideological goals of the Islamic State movement in the rest of the world.

While supporter-sourced conflict reports tend to take a more speculative tone than official IS-M reporting, they are nevertheless orientated towards achieving similar goals – that is, to demonstrate that IS-M is a dynamic and relevant power-broker in Mozambique, one that is perpetually fighting back against centuries of Muslim victimisation and resource exploitation.

Efforts to blend IS-M's local activities into the Islamic State's global agenda play upon pre-existing, and deeply rooted, ethno-religious tensions in Mozambique and its neighbouring countries. They are geared towards exaggerating the grievances that lie at the heart of Cabo Delgado's insurrection and embedding them within a strategic narrative of *jihad*.

Introduction

In March 2021, insurgent forces associated with the Islamic State's affiliate in Mozambique – which is known locally as al-Shabab (not to be confused with the Somalia-based al-Qa'ida affiliate) but in official Islamic State nomenclature as Wilayat Wasat Ifriqiyya (aka Central Africa Province or ISCAP) – launched an assault on the coastal city of Palma in the northern Cabo Delgado province, temporarily seizing control of it and jeopardising a multi-billion dollar gas exploration project at the nearby Afungi peninsula.[1]

The regional challenges posed by the Islamic State in East Africa were already well-known – weeks earlier, its affiliate in Mozambique had been listed as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist organisation by the United States (US) government.[2] And, just eight months earlier, ISCAP had launched a similarly sized attack on the city of Mocímboa da Praia, though that time it did not quickly relinquish control of it like it did Palma.

Before it seized Mocímboa da Praia in 2020, ISCAP's Mozambican branch was low on the list of global counter-terrorism policy priorities. While its existence was officially declared by the Islamic State the year before, its kinetic activity prior to that campaign had been modest in both scale and ambition. In the wake of its capture of Mocímboa da Praia, however, it was starkly apparent to defence and counter-terrorism policymakers the world over that ISCAP was more than a marginal force engaging in remote, low-intensity warfare. Despite, however, the surge of interest that followed its seemingly rapid emergence and ascendance in Cabo Delgado and beyond, credible information regarding the insurgency's origins, objectives, and affiliation with the Islamic State has been persistently scarce, something that has given rise to an analytical landscape that is characterised by uncertainties and analytical disagreements.[3]

Deploying the full range of qualitative and quantitative tools and datasets at ExTrac's disposal, this report sets out to improve our understanding of ISCAP in Mozambique – which, to avoid confusion with ISCAP's other branch in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), will henceforth be referred to as IS-M. In line with other ExTrac Threat Assessments, the report will set out its origins, objectives, and likely future trajectory. In doing so, it has four parts:

Section 1 gives a history of IS-M, tracing its roots in socio-political and economic dynamics that have long characterised Cabo Delgado's relationship with the rest of Mozambique and, indeed, the broader region.

Section 2 assesses IS-M's operational trajectory over the course of the last few years, identifying three distinct phases in its military campaigns and strategising.

Section 3 turns to IS-M's outreach capabilities, exploring how it recruits, whom it recruits, and how its on-the-ground activities are refracted through the lens of the Islamic State's global media apparatus.

Section 4 explores how these aforementioned dynamics are perceived by supporters of the Islamic State online, weighing up the two key discourses that underpin supporter perceptions of IS-M today.

1 'Mozambique gas project: Total halts work after Palma attacks,' BBC News, 26 April.

2 'State Department Terrorist Designations of ISIS Affiliates and Leaders in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique,' US Department of State, 10 March 2021.

3 Jason Warner, 'The Islamic State has 'provinces' in Africa. That doesn't mean what you think,' Washington Post, 7 June 2021.

1. Background

Origins

Locally, IS-M is known as either Ansar al-Sunna ('the supporters of the Sunnah'), Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jama'a ('the people of the Sunnah and community,' a generic label that is used by dozens if not hundreds of groups – overwhelmingly non-jihadist – the world over) or, more commonly, al-Shabab ('the youth,' not to be confused with the al-Qa'ida-affiliated, Harakat al-Shabab al-Muslimin). These monikers refer to its branding prior to its formal integration with the Islamic State in April 2019 – and one of them in particular, al-Shabab, continues to be in regular local use today.

The broader ideological movement from which IS-M emerged has its roots in the complex relations between Muslim civil society and Mozambique's post-independence ruling party. The Marxist-socialist Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO) began an effort to co-opt Muslim elites beginning in 1981 following a period of intensive anti-Islamic campaigning in the seventies. As part of this effort of co-optation, FRELIMO began empowering Muslim community leaders in southern Mozambique at the expense of those in the north when it set up the state-backed Islamic Council of Mozambique (CISLAMO).[4] Frustrated by their systematic marginalisation at the hands of the state, a group of northern Saudi-trained Islamist clerics founded Ansar al-Sunna, formally announcing themselves in the late 1990s and positioning their organisation as a more credible regional alternative to CISLAMO in the years that followed.

Similarly orientated clusters of hard-line, anti-government ideologues emerged organically in the region over the course of the next two decades, often with Kenyan and/or Tanzanian Islamist influences, before eventually unifying under the broad rubric of Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jama'a, which, in 2019, was formally anointed as one half of ISCAP, the other being based in the DRC.

Figure 1. Early image of Islamic State fighters in Mozambique. First posted in May 2018.

4 James Barnett, 'The 'Central African' *jihad*: Islamism and Nation-Building in Mozambique and Uganda,' Hudson Institute, 29 October 2020.

Appeal & Motivations

The fragmented socio-political dynamics that have characterised northern Mozambique over the last fifty years or so have been a backdrop for a more immediately salient factor in the rise of IS-M – namely, socioeconomic marginalisation.

Cabo Delgado is simultaneously Mozambique's poorest and most well-resourced province.[5] It is home to large reserves of rubies and graphite as well as immense off-shore gas fields.[6] While its resource wealth has enriched the Mozambican government and created thousands of jobs, most of which have gone to foreign workers, it has not meaningfully impacted on the local population, which, has long suffered from poor access to basic infrastructure and services. This inequality is one of the principal radicalisation pain points in Cabo Delgado today, leveraged as it is by both IS-M locally and the Islamic State globally as evidence of a 'crusader-communist' conspiracy against the north's Sunni Muslim community.[7]

Alongside these economic factors are long-held ethno-religious tensions that embody the relationship between Cabo Delgado's Sunni Muslim population and the central government in Maputo.[8] Besides widespread anti-government sentiment, which has accrued over decades of real and perceived corruption and rights abuses, there is a fundamentally ethnic appeal to IS-M's revolutionary offer. This appeal promises to empower Cabo Delgado's predominantly Muslim Mwani minority as well as parts of the majority-but-still-marginalised Makua community in the face of the region's long-dominant Christian-majority Makonde elite. When framed along specifically religious, not ethnic, lines – as is the Islamic State's wont – IS-M's hyper-local appeal folds directly into its rhetoric around the need for anti-Christian *jihad* in Africa.

النبأ — بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم — العدد ٢٢١ الخميس ١١ ذو القعدة ١٤٤١ هـ — الافتتاحية ٣

الصليبيون يخاطرون باستثماراتهم في موزمبيق!

من يتابع تغطية وسائل الإعلام المختلفة لأخبار معارك جنود الخلافة ضد الجيش الموزمبيقي الصليبي، يجد أن التركيز يكاد ينحصر بأهمية مواقع هذه المعارك قرب حقول الغاز الضخمة التي استثمرت فيها شركاتٌ النفط الصليبية مليارات الدولارات، وما سوى ذلك ليس مهماً للدول الكافرة ولا لإعلامها.

فهذه المنطقة التي كانت ولا تزال تحت نفوذ دولة البرتغال الصليبية التي خرجت منها قبل نصف قرن، وتحكمها اليوم عصابةٌ متجبرةٌ من ملاحدة الشيوعية؛ ليس فيها ما يهمّ الصليبيين غير احتياطاتها الكبيرة من الثروات الباطنية المختلفة والتي تتشارك الاستثمار فيها شركاتٌ أمريكية وفرنسية وجنوب إفريقية، وتطمح شركاتٌ روسية وصينية لأن تجد لنفسها موطئ قدمٍ فيها أيضاً.

وعلى مدى قرون من الزمان، سام الصليبيون والملاحدة الشيوعيون المسلمين في تلك الديار سوء العذاب، وأكرهوا قسماً كبيراً على ترك دينهم، ولم يتوقف ذلك الإجرام حتى بعد نهاية الحكم البرتغالي واستيلاء العصابة الشيوعية على الحكم، وكحال المسلمين في كل مكان كانت جرائم الكافرين في موزمبيق بحقهم نسياً منسياً؛ حتى أعلنت ثلةٌ من المجاهدين فيها انضمامها إلى جماعة المسلمين، ورفعت راية الدولة الإسلامية في تلك البقاع، ورأى العالمُ فرحة الناس هناك بتنكيل المجاهدين في أعداء الإسلام، عندما فقط انتبه الصليبيون أن استمرار جرائم الحكومة الشيوعية بحق المسلمين قد فتح الباب أمام انتقام جنود الخلافة من جيش موزمبيق الصليبي ومَن عاونه من الكفار والمرتدين.

وخاصة أن من سياسة هذا الجيش الجبان أنه بعد كلّ هزيمةٍ منكرةٍ يتلقاها على أيدي جنود الخلافة يزيد من عدوانه على الأهالي في المنطقة التي يُهزم فيها، أملاً منه في استعادة هيبةٍ مزعومةٍ يحاول فرضها على المستضعفين بالبطش والإرهاب، الأمر الذي يؤدي بدوره إلى زيادة التحاق المسلمين بجنود الدولة الإسلامية، كما أن هذه الدول الكافرة تسعى لأن تبقى الحرب مع جنود الخلافة داخل حدود موزمبيق فقط، لا سيما وأن مناطق انتشارهم وعملياتهم تقع قريباً من حدود (تنزانيا).

وبعد فشل هذا الجيش المتهالك في تحقيق وعوده للأمريكيين والفرنسيين بالنصر على جنود الخلافة وتكبّده الخسائر الفادحة في تلك الحرب، بادر إلى الاستعانة بمرتزقة الاستخبارات الصليبية الروسية العاملين تحت غطاء شركة "فاغنر" والذين نكّل بهم جنود الخلافة أيضاً وأجبروهم على إخراج اسمهم من المعركة التي افتضح حجم خسائرهم الكبيرة فيها، فانتقلت الحكومة الموزمبيقية الكافرة إلى طلب الدعم والإسناد من الدول الصليبية المجاورة والبعيدة.

وقبل أن تقرر الدول الصليبية في أوربا وأمريكا إرسال قواتها هناك وجعل تلك المنطقة ساحة جديدة للحرب على الدولة الإسلامية، وما يتعلق بذلك من مصاعب مشابهة لما تواجهه في حربها الغير منتهية بغرب إفريقية؛ فإنها اليوم تسعى لتوريط حكومة "جنوب إفريقية" وجيشها في قيادة الحرب هناك، لقربها المكاني ولعلاقاتها القوية مع حكومة موزمبيق، ولكن لدى "جنوب إفريقية" ما يكفي من المشكلات الداخلية ليدفعها نحو تجنب التورط في هذه الحرب التي ستوقعها في مأزق مالي وعسكري وأمني كبير، وقد تعود عليها بتعجيل جنود الدولة الإسلامية فتح جبهة قتال داخل حدودها! بإذن الله تعالى.

ولم يكن دعم تحالف "دول جنوب إفريقية" للجيش الموزمبيقي بالمستوى الذي يريده، إذ اقتصر حتى الآن على عدد قليل من الجنود المدرّبين والمزوّدين بكم قليل من السلاح، وذلك لأن بعض هذه الدول تعاني أصلاً من نزاعات داخلية أو تورطت في حرب الصومال التي استنزفتهم طويلاً، أو أنها تخشى من تورطٍ طويل الأمد في ساحة القتال هذه، كما تورطت قبلها الجيوش الإفريقية الأخرى في حرب الدولة الإسلامية، كحال الكاميرون ونيجيريا وتشاد والنيجر وبنين ومالي وبوركينا فاسو والكونغو، واحتمال تورط جيوش موريتانيا والجزائر وساحل العاج فيها أيضاً، الأمر الذي يشكل صورةً مرعبةً لأي جيش يفكر بإغراق نفسه في حرب طويلة في الموزمبيق.

والنتيجة من ذلك كله أن الصليبيين اليوم يعيشون حيرة من أمرهم، فهم يخشون أن يؤدي تدخلهم الكبير في هذه الحرب إلى انضمام المزيد من المسلمين في موزمبيق وجوارها إلى جنود الخلافة، خاصة وأن العدوان على الإسلام وأهله في كل دول المنطقة كبير وقديم، كما يخشون أن يؤدي ذلك إلى اتساع نار الجهاد الملتهبة التي باتت تهدد بإحراق الشرك والمشركين في هذه المنطقة المهمة بالنسبة إليهم، لما فيها من ثروات وإمكانات.

وإن كان الصليبيون يحسبون أنهم بدعمهم للحكومة الكافرة في موزمبيق سيحمون استثماراتهم ويضمنون استمرار نهبهم لثروات المنطقة فإنهم واهمون، إذْ لن تلبث الأوضاع أن تستقر لجنود الخلافة -بإذن الله- عاجلاً أم آجلاً، فهم في تقدم وانتصار وعدوهم إلى تراجع واندحار، بفضل الله تعالى، وإن استمرار الصليبيين في حشد القوى ضد الدولة الإسلامية فضلاً عن تدخلهم المباشر في الحرب هناك، كما ينادي بعضهم، لن يؤدي إلا إلى ما لا يشتهون! ولينصرنّ الله من ينصره إن الله لقوي عزيز.

Figure 2. Mozambique-focused editorial in Islamic State newspaper drawing attention to 'crusader' investment in Cabo Delgado. 2 July 2020.

5 Nation Nyoka, The natural resource curse in Cabo Delgado,' Mail & Guardian, 21 October 2020.

6 'Mozambique liquified natural gas project,' Total. Last accessed 6 September 2021.

7 João Feijó, 'Characterization and social organization of machababos from the discourses of kidnapped women,' OMRMZ, April 2021.

8 Eric Morier-Genoud, 'The jihadi insurgency in Mozambique: origins, nature and beginning,' Journal of Eastern African Studies 14:3, 396-412.

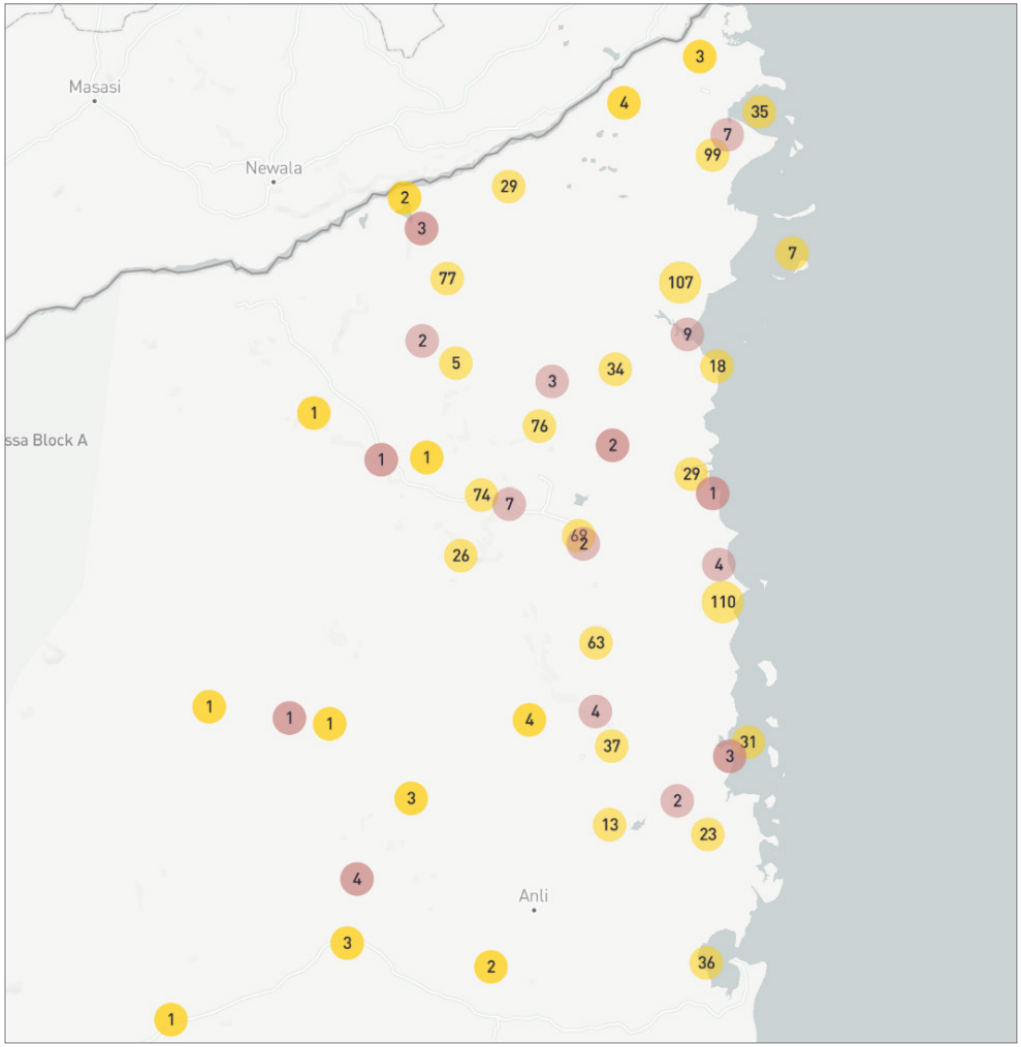


Figure 3. Islamic State-reported attacks vs. ACLED-reported attacks in Cabo Delgado as of September 2021. Note the significant discrepancy in number.

On top of these factors are more recent grievances felt as a result of the brutal approach to counter-insurgency that has characterised the Mozambican security forces' response to the rise of IS-M in recent years.[9] Manifesting as anything from indiscriminate community harassment and arbitrary detention to summary executions, sexual violence and the use of torture and bodily mutilation, these heavy-handed methods have given momentum to IS-M's conspiratorial worldview. They are framed as evidence that its insurrection is not 'just' a war over political or economic influence; rather, it is a 'defensive *jihad*' to right the wrongs faced by Sunni Muslims in the north, who are being persecuted solely on account of their religion.

Relations with the Islamic State

Due to the incremental, staggered manner in which IS-M emerged in the rural north in recent decades, it has long been defined by international and regional exposure to extremist teachings of Islam that contrast starkly with existing local religious practices. As a result, even prior to its formal integration with the Islamic State, the leadership and rank and file of the movement was known to comprise both local and foreign nationals with established links to religious and militant networks that reached as far as Saudi Arabia, Libya, Algeria and Sudan.[10]

Soon after it was formally anointed as an Islamic State *wilaya* in 2019, IS-M's operations became more strategically ambitious and its approach to insurgency more tactically adept. Whether this was merely coincidental timing or due to strategic buy-in from the Islamic State's overarching leadership, just over a year after its formal declaration as ISCAP, the fruits of this ascendance manifested with alarming immediacy in the assault on Mocímboa da Praia and, some eight months later, the attack on Palma. While the Islamic State itself is unlikely to have had a direct operational hand in either campaign, the timing of both – i.e., soon after the ISCAP wilaya declaration – proved to be ideal fodder for its propagandists.[11]

9 'Mozambique: Security Forces Abusing Suspected Insurgents,' Human Rights Watch, 12 December 2018.

10 Saide Habibe, Salvador Forquilha and João Pereira, 'Islamic Radicalization in Northern Mozambique: The Case of Mocímboa da Praia,' IESE, September 2019.

11 Warner, 'The Islamic State has 'provinces' in Africa.'

In any case, as mentioned above, organisationally IS-M now falls into ISCAP, the Islamic State's Central Africa Province, together with its counterpart in the DRC and, per analysis conducted by the United Nations (UN), a logistical hub in Somalia (NB: this is distinct from Wilayat al-Sumal, aka Somalia Province).[12] It is formally administered from the Levant through the Islamic State's *idarat al-wilayat al-ba'idah* (Administration of Distant Provinces) with, per the UN, the al-Karrar Office in Somalia nominally in charge of relations between it and the core in Syria/Iraq.

Questions still remain as to the precise nature of the Islamic State's relationship with IS-M, questions that place both parties in a position of vulnerability. Since 2019, IS-M reporting has emerged fitfully at best from the Islamic State's formal communications network. This stands in contrast to reporting from the other 'half' of ISCAP, which operates in similarly remote terrain – specifically in Ituri and North-Kivu in the DRC (i.e., somewhere with similarly poor media penetration and internet access) – but is nevertheless a much more regular fixture in the Islamic State's official media output.[13] Importantly, while the Islamic State is known to mis- or under-report in other contexts for strategic purposes, the irregularity that characterises its communications from or about Mozambique suggest that this is more a case of miscommunication than it is deliberate misdirection.[14]

12 'Thirteenth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat,' United Nations Security Council, 27 July 2021.

13 '1. Over the last 6 months, #IS's activities in the #DRC have been intensifying. While there was a similar surge in Sep-Dec last year, it was much less sustained. May 2021 was a high point for #ISCAP, with 6 times as many attacks reported that month as there were in January 2021,' @Ex_Trac, 8 July 2021, https://twitter.com/Ex_Trac/status/1413129774193463296.

14 Gregory Waters and Charlie Winter, 'Islamic State Under-Reporting in Central Syria: Misdirection, Misinformation, or Miscommunication,' Middle East Institute, 2 September 2021.

2. Operational Capability

Since 4 June 2019, the day that IS-M's first attack was reported via the Islamic State's official communications network, it has claimed some 57 unique operations in the region – 55 in Mozambique and two of them just across the border in Tanzania. While useful indicators of activity, these claims only tell us a small part of the story. Indeed, when cross-checked against data compiled by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project (ACLED) using ExTrac, there is a 94 percent differential between what IS-M is officially reporting from Cabo Delgado and what is being attributed to IS-M in Cabo Delgado.

While reporting discrepancies like this are not unique to IS-M, with similar under-reporting dynamics characterising Islamic State affiliate activities from Central Syria to Southeast Asia, this dynamic is unusually pronounced in Mozambique. While it is not possible to know with certainty what is driving this variance, the extent and unpredictability of the discrepancies is such that it seems more likely to be a case of miscommunication than misdirection, a dynamic that would be broadly consistent with communications trends from other emergent or embryonic members of the Islamic State's global affiliate network.[15]

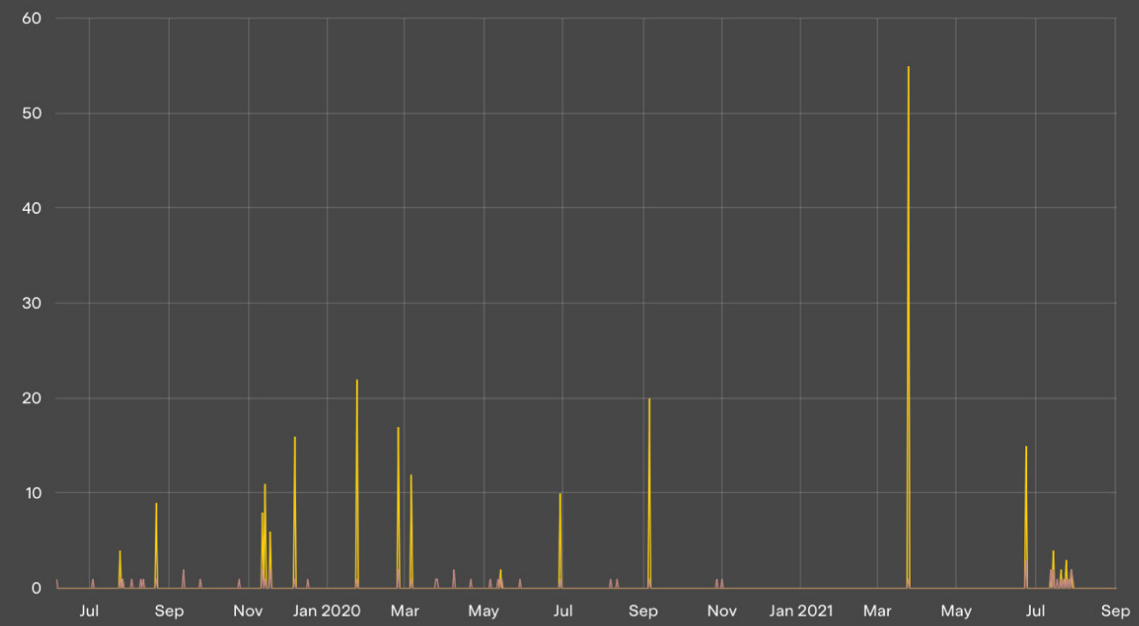


Figure 4. Islamic State-reported operations in Mozambique, June 2019 to September 2021.

15 Haroro Ingram, Craig Whiteside and Charlie Winter, 'The Routinization of the Islamic State's Global Enterprise,' Hudson Institute, 5 April 2021.

Operational Trajectory

By disaggregating and combining insights from both IS-M's official reporting and other triangulated on-the-ground sources, including ACLED, ExTrac analysis indicates that IS-M's operational trajectory since 2019 can be cleanly divided into three periods.

The first phase lasted the eighteen months between May 2019 and October 2020. It was a period of fairly regular reporting from IS-M that was characterised by steady intensification and incremental territorial expansion, something that ultimately culminated in the takeover of the city of Mocímboa da Praia in late summer 2020. During this phase, IS-M's attacks started out small-scale before graduating into more strategically ambitious campaigns, an evolution indicated by the IS-M-reported death tolls that are shown in yellow in Figure 4. While such figures should be taken with a grain of salt, they give a rough sense of operational scale, as well as how that scale changes relative to previous operational trends.

The period that followed, which lasted between November 2020 and May 2021, was characterised by almost total silence from the Islamic State's central media apparatus but a spate of consolidation-focused violence from IS-M, and, in March, the attack on Palma. During this time, IS-M prioritised the establishment of strategic depth in rural Cabo Delgado, securing rear operating terrains inland around the towns of Mueda and Muidumbe on the Makonde Plateau before advancing, when it deemed itself to be secure enough, towards the port city of Palma in the northeast.[16] This operation, IS-M's most notable attack to date – and the only one during this period that was reported by the Islamic State's Central Media Diwan – enabled it to signal its kinetic capabilities both locally and globally, boost morale in the rank and file, accrue munitions and other material supplies, and send a clear message of defiant confidence to the Mozambican government and its security forces and allies.

16 'Mozambique: Protect Residents Fleeing Northern Town,' Human Rights Watch, 26 March 2021.

Figure 5. Islamic State targeting focus in Mozambique.

Figure 6. Location of security incidents in Northern Mozambique, January 2019 to September 2021.

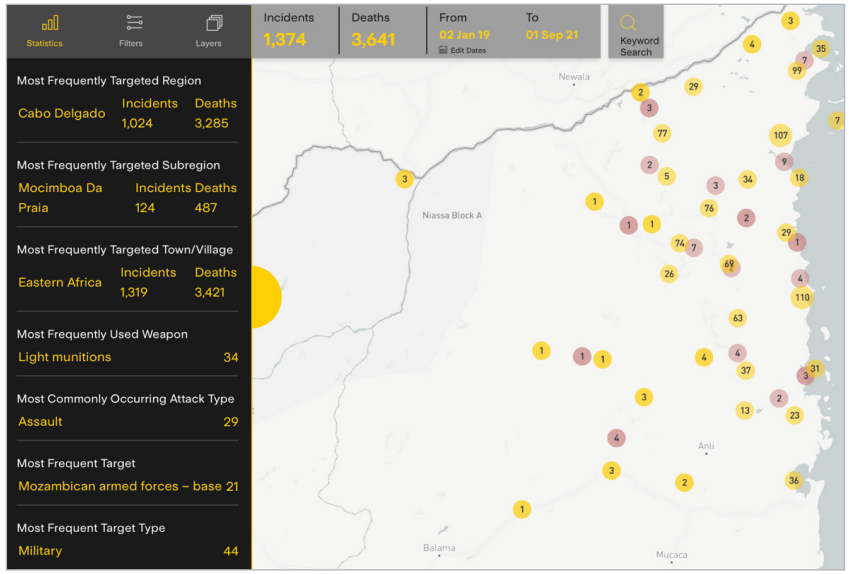
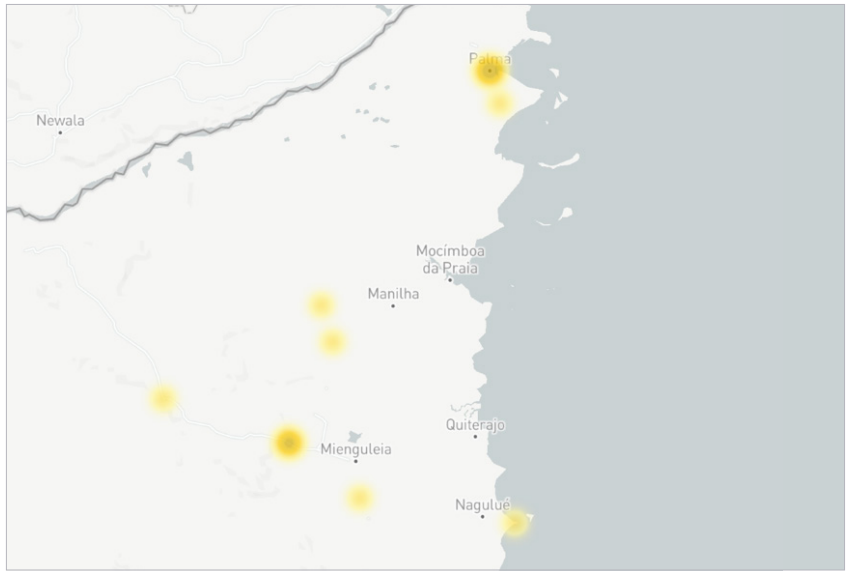


Figure 7. IS-M-reported attacks during its third operational phase (June-July 2021).



Notably, IS-M's focus on entrenchment prior to strategic expansion during this period is typical as insurgencies begin to transition from rural to urban terrains. It privileges group survival over rapid and unsustainable gains, and, as such, has been a preferred approach for the Islamic State globally over the course of the last decade.

The third strategic period for IS-M, which spanned the five weeks between 23 June 2021 and 29 July 2021, saw IS-M reporting operations at a rate that far outstripped previous communications dynamics. Indeed, 15 of the 16 attacks it has claimed in 2021 were reported in that single five-week period. This surge in official output, which was followed by a resumption of IS-M's reporting silence, appears to have been tied to its attempted defence of Mocímboa da Praia, which ultimately collapsed at the beginning of August 2021.

Interestingly, as Figure 7 indicates, not one of the 15 attacks reported during this period occurred near Mocímboa da Praia. This suggests that, through this spike in output, IS-M was attempting to signal that it was still active, aggressive, and capable, even as it was on the cusp of losing control of what was then its most important strategic holdout.

Coming as it did on the back of an eight-month fallow period of officially branded IS-M communications, the uptick was almost certainly due to an internal decision by the Islamic State to publicise more of IS-M's activities as it fought back in Mocímboa da Praia. Notably, this decision coincided with, or was perhaps hastened by, the internationalisation of the crisis, including July's deployment of predominantly Christian Rwandan and Southern African Development Community (SADC) soldiers to Cabo Delgado[17] and the prioritisation of West and Central Africa at the Global Coalition's June summit in Rome.[18]

17 Carien du Plessis, 'Mozambique: Rwandan troops celebrate first success, South Africa forces arrive,' The Africa Report, 29 July 2021

18 Humeyra Pamuk, 'Africa Italy calls for African task force to tackle Islamic State threat,' Reuters, 28 June 2021.

Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs)

IS-M's TTPs vary in accordance with its objectives and targets and the terrain in which it is operating. In rural areas, it has tended to rely on simple raids, using low- and medium-calibre weapons to wreak havoc across towns and villages, often razing them to the ground. In such operations, it has specifically set out to target Christian communities with a view to clearing and securing territory, not to mention polarising local communities and accruing food and fuel.

On connecting highways between its holdouts inland and coastal cities in the region, IS-M has frequently deployed more complex, mixed-munition ambushes that are geared towards terrorising local security forces on the one hand and seizing weapons and ammunition on the other.

Lastly, in the context of its onslaughts against urban centres, IS-M has relied on a combination of troop surges outside city perimeters and the simultaneous activation of covert cells within them, deploying strategic operations in a manner that is straight out of the insurgent playbook and, at the same time, directly reminiscent of the Islamic State's attack on Mosul in June 2014.

3. Outreach & Propaganda

Strategy

Like most other violent extremist insurgent movements, IS-M has three principal influence objectives: propagation, legitimisation and intimidation.[19]

Propagation refers to its efforts to attract recruits, draw in donors, and expand the reach of its ideology.

Legitimisation refers to its efforts to justify violence and situate its actions within a broad Islamic-historic context.

Intimidation refers to its efforts to scare and provoke adversaries. These most often manifest in propaganda of the deed (i.e., violence deployed to communicate socio-political/ideological intent) and propaganda of the virtual deed (i.e., footage or imagery of violence deployed to communicate socio-political/ideological intent).

These objectives are usually leveraged simultaneously, with the relative prominence of each fluctuating in accordance with IS-M's situational context.

19 Bockstette, C. (2008). Jihadist terrorist use of strategic communication management techniques. George C. Marshall Center for Security Studies; Winter, C. (2018). Making sense of jihadi stratcom. Perspectives on Terrorism 11(1); Winter, C. (2020). Redefining propaganda: The media strategy of Daesh. RUSI Journal 164:7.

Target Audiences

At present, IS-M's outreach efforts – both persuasive and coercive – focus on one of four target audiences.

At-risk youth	IS-M's main recruitment focus is vulnerable young people, primarily Mwani and Swahili speakers, that are located in the following districts of Cabo Delgado: Ibo; Macomia; Muidumbe; Mocímboa da Praia; Palma; and Pemba. Those facing educational, employment and social marginalisation are at heightened risk of seeing IS-M as a good 'career path' – that is, a pathway towards a viable livelihood and/or social inclusion.[20]
Women	Women have been specific targets of IS-M's coercive recruitment efforts in recent years (e.g., through forcible enlistment on IS-M's part or because they joined to protect themselves from the risk of sexual violence at the hands of local security forces).[21]
Internally displaced persons (IDPs)	There are more than 700,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in northern Mozambique. IDP populations are at elevated risk of recruitment if violent extremist influences are present within them at the point at which they were displaced.[22] In the Cabo Delgado context, this is almost certain to be the case.[23]
Regional sympathisers	Another key IS-M audience consists of Islamic State sympathisers from Tanzania, the DRC, Kenya, Somalia and beyond who follow IS-M's activities via Facebook and Whatsapp, as well as illicit offline networks and covert communications on Telegram, Rocket.Chat and Element.[24] In contrast to external sympathiser audiences, whose 'participation' in IS-M's insurgency mainly sees them observing it from the side-lines, commenting on its prospects and inciting violence, members of this regional audience may actually go on to physically join IS-M or offer material support that tangibly benefits its operations.

20 'Stemming the Insurrection in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado,' International Crisis Group, 11 June 2021.

21 Feijó, 'Characterization and social organization of machababos from the discourses of kidnapped women.

22 Barbara Sude, David Stebbins, Sarah Weilant, 'Lessening the Risk of Refugee Radicalization Lessons for the Middle East from Past Crises,' RAND, 2015.

23 'UNHCR Mozambique Fact Sheet, January – April 2021,' UNHCR, 17 May 2021.

24 Source: ExTrac.

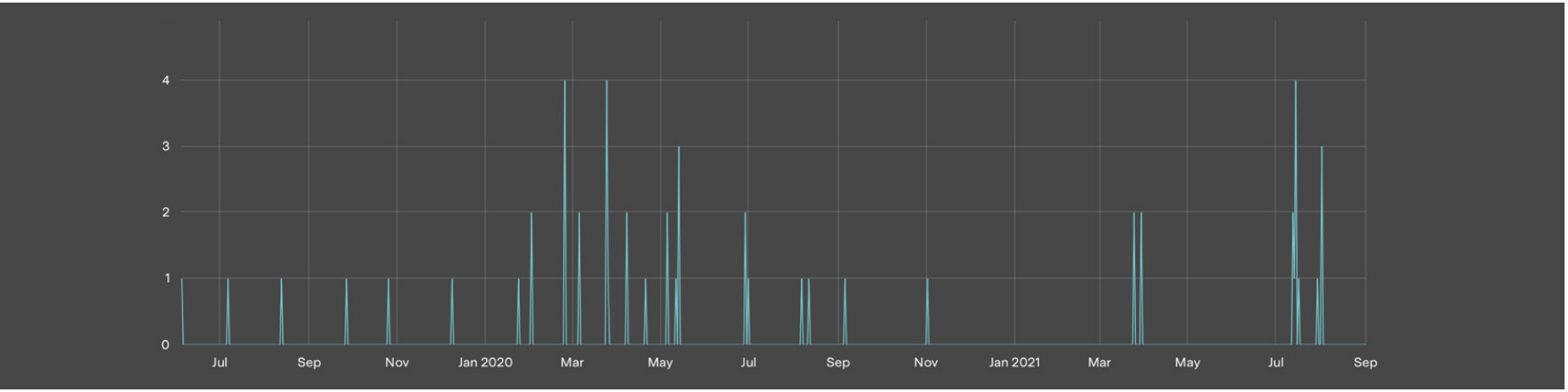


Figure 8. Official Islamic State Mozambique content, June 2019 to September 2021.

Local Outreach

IS-M recruits through both coercive and persuasive activities depending on whom – and where – it is trying to recruit. In Cabo Delgado, from which the majority of its fighters hail, it acquires new members through a range of socioeconomic and ideological appeals as well as mass kidnappings, the latter of which target children and adolescents especially.

Its socioeconomic appeals are grounded in the idea that joining IS-M is a good 'career option' for local communities.[25] Participation in its war is framed as financially viable and of collective benefit to the broader region, the idea being that undermining the Makonde-Maputo hold over Cabo Delgado's riches will directly enhance the prospects of local Sunni Muslim communities (both Mwani and Makua) in the province. IS-M's more overtly ideological appeals reframe these basic socio-political ideas through the lens of jihadism.[26] As such, the Makonde-Maputo hold over Cabo Delgado's riches becomes the 'crusader-communist' hold over Cabo Delgado's riches, and any effort to right-size the imbalance with which they are distributed is repositioned as defensive *jihad*, not 'simple' insurgency.

IS-M's coercive recruitment efforts, on the other hand, tend to manifest in mass kidnappings of members of local communities, usually during assaults on villages or towns.[27] Having been kidnapped, youth and adolescent hostages are then trained and indoctrinated in IS-M camps in remote rural areas. This training draws together utopian promises about the fruits of *jihad* and Islam's provisions for social justice and equality (for Muslims) and the twin themes of socio-political exclusion and economic marginalisation. Not only is this approach typical of child soldiering in other parts of Central and West Africa (including in the context of ISWAP), it is directly reminiscent of the Islamic State's coercive recruitment practices in Syria and Iraq, which, at its height in 2014-16, involved at least 40 days' worth of intensive ideological indoctrination prior to other forms of physical or operational training, let alone deployment.[28]

25 ICG, "Stemming the Insurrection in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado.'

26 'The Crusaders at risk due to their investments in Mozambique,' al-Naba' 241, 2 July 2020.

27 Feijó, 'Characterization and social organization of machababos from the discourses of kidnapped women.'

28 Asaad Almohammad, 'ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training, and Deployment,' ICCT, February 2018.

Outside of Cabo Delgado, in places where IS-M does not have an active military presence, it is reliant on persuasive methods. These rely on illicit social networking and covert ideological outreach, both online (usually via Facebook, WhatsApp, or, to a lesser degree, Telegram) and offline.[29] In particular, IS-M is known to recruit from provinces south of Cabo Delgado like Nampula as well as neighbouring states, in particular Tanzania, Kenya, Somalia, and the DRC. Anecdotal evidence also indicates the presence of a small number of fair-skinned and blue-eyed individuals.[30]

While, at the leadership level, IS-M's senior officials are thought to be ideologically motivated, this combined coercive/persuasive approach to recruitment has resulted in a bifurcation of motivations in its rank and file.[31] On the one hand, there are those who willingly joined the group driven by their desire to engage in *jihad*, be 'better' Muslims and fulfil its messianic promises. On the other, there are those who were coerced into joining it or who joined it for economic reasons; these latter individuals tend to be younger and more directly attuned to IS-M's local socio-political grievance narrative. They also reportedly behave less predictably and in a manner that is less bound by ideology, often engaging in acts that would be considered un-Islamic by the Islamic State's overarching leadership (like missing prayer).[32]

Online Outreach

Since its declaration in 2019, the Islamic State has published 85 Mozambique-focused pieces of content, 74 of them appearing as official products of the Wilayat Wasat Ifriqiyya Media Office. Specifically, this output has comprised: 55 attack claims, 18 photo-reports, nine A'maq reports, and four videos.

Thematically, this content has been split between four themes:

Aftermath: Sixty-seven percent of IS-M content to date has depicted the aftermath of IS-M attacks. In this category, there are four distinct sub-groupings: war spoils; enemy captives; enemy corpses; and damaged ground vehicles and drones.

Offensive operations: Twenty-seven percent has documented what are framed as offensive military operations. These usually comprise detailed reports on major attacks like the assault on Palma or photographs of operations as they are ongoing.

Executions: Three percent has documented the execution of enemy 'spies' or prisoners of war captured during kidnappings or assaults. IS-M executions like these ones, which occurred in a battlefield context, should not be confused with executions that occur in a civilian context (i.e., as part of 'shari'a-compliant' governance), the latter of which have not to date been reported by IS-M.

Defensive operations: Three percent has focused on defensive military activities. Most revolve around foiled enemy offensives and 'successful' counterattacks.

29 'Cabo Ligado Monthly: July 2021,' Cabo Ligado, 16 August 2021.

30 ICG, "Stemming the Insurrection in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado.'

31 Feijó, 'Characterization and social organization of machababos from the discourses of kidnapped women.'

32 Ibid.

Besides these materials, the Islamic State has also released two Mozambique-focused editorial essays in al-Naba', its weekly newspaper.[33] Both gave a broad strategic framing of IS-M's rise and role Mozambique, with the first, published in 2020, holding that Islam in Cabo Delgado had been broken by Portugal's 'Crusading' imperialism and further undermined by the '*taghut* [tyrannical] group of Communist atheists [FRELIMO]' that took the reins of power upon Mozambique's declaration of independence in 1975. Both this and the second al-Naba' essay, which was published in 2021, also claimed that global 'Crusaders' – i.e., the United States and Europe in particular – are interested in Cabo Delgado solely because of its 'massive reserves of natural resources' and, more recently, the stated presence of Islamic State supporters.

Besides this, they each positioned IS-M's insurrection in northern Mozambique as part of a broader defensive war against the enemies of Islam, holding that military intervention in support of Maputo would only provoke a greater appetite for mobilisation among Muslims in Mozambique and the region more broadly:

'[M]obilising forces against the Islamic State in addition to direct [Coalition] intervention in the war [in Mozambique], as some are calling for, will only lead to that for which they do not wish.'[34]

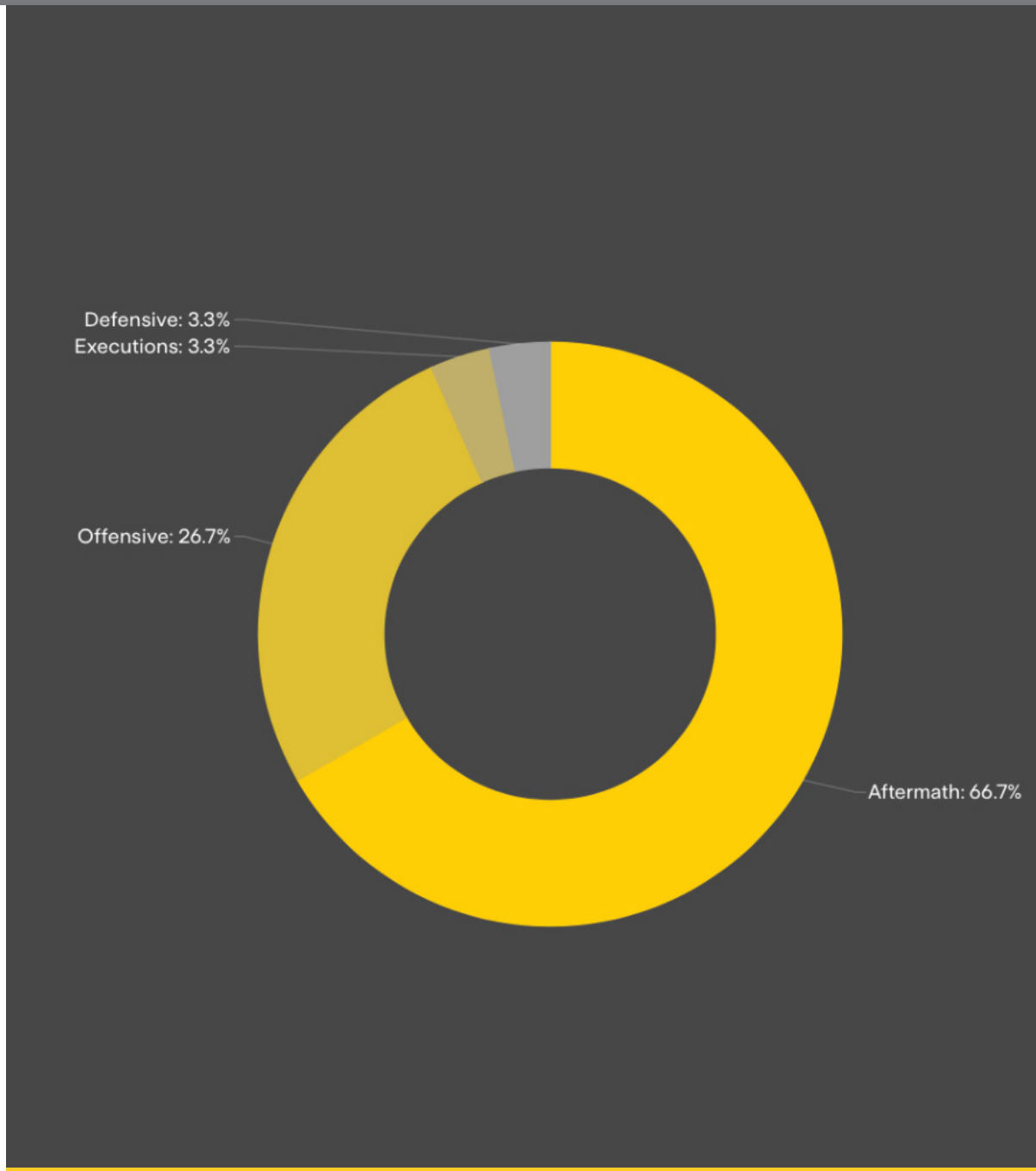


Figure 9. Thematic focus of the Islamic State's Mozambique-focused content.

33 'The Crusaders at risk due to their investments in Mozambique,' al-Naba' 241, 2 July 2020; 'The time has come for them,' al-Naba' 298, 5 August 2021.

34 'The Crusaders at risk due to their investments in Mozambique,' al-Naba'.

Notably, in July 2021, there was a surge in official IS-M output. As mentioned above, there is a reasonable chance that this surge, which coincided with IS-M's defence of Mocímboa da Praia, was a deliberate response to the deployment of Rwandan and SADC soldiers to Cabo Delgado[35] and the prioritisation of West and Central Africa at the Global Coalition's June summit in Rome.[36] Regardless of whether or not this is the case, both of these developments have been seized upon by the Islamic State as cast-iron evidence of the expansion to Mozambique of the global 'Crusader' campaign against Islam.

In any case, given the communications irregularities that characterise the relationship between IS-M and the Islamic State's central leadership, not to mention the fact that IS-M's principal recruitment effort focuses on offline spaces in northern Mozambique and the broader region, it is unsurprising that i) official IS-M content has emerged with relative irregularity over the course of the years since its formal declaration and that ii) the IS-M content that has emerged to date has been fairly generic, comprising conflict-focused reporting or broad strategic policy statements. That being said, the acceleration in both content production and complexity in July 2021 was cause for concern, something that could be an indication of a deepening or formalising of IS-M-Islamic State media protocols.

35 Carien du Plessis, 'Mozambique: Rwandan troops celebrate first success, South Africa forces arrive,' The Africa Report, 29 July 2021.

36 Pamuk, 'Africa Italy calls for African task force to tackle Islamic State threat.'

4. Global Perceptions

Among sympathisers of the Islamic State online (who refer to themselves using the Arabic word for 'supporters,' *munasirin*), most discussion of IS-M's exploits focuses on one of two lines of discourse: i) commentary and analysis regarding its military exploits and successes, and ii) efforts to blend IS-M's local political objectives with the loftier ideological goals of the Islamic State movement in the rest of the world.

Within these thematic parameters, the extent to which IS-M is a topic of focus for the *munasirin* community varies considerably in accordance with the ebb and flow of information about its circumstances and objectives. On that basis, given the increase in IS-M output of late, *munasirin* have been taking significantly more interest in its movements.

Strength and Capability

Invariably, when news of IS-M's advances or strategic inroads is distributed through official Islamic State channels on platforms like Telegram or Rocket.Chat, the *munasirin* community celebrates it enthusiastically and unanimously. However, as noted, until recently at least, these occasions have been few and far between since 2019.

For that reason, some *munasirin* have opted to take things into their own hands by setting up IS-M conflict trackers that provide regular, albeit unofficial, updates on locally reported security developments in the region. For example, on 15 August, one prominent pro-Islamic State Mozambique-watcher posted the following alert:

'#Mozambique A local source confirmed the arrival of large fires in the villages of Mbau, Mangoma and Ntowe yesterday, Saturday, 14/8/2021. *These fires often refer to clashes* on the ground between IS militants (ISCAP) and forces allied with Mozambique, Mbau village *may have been subjected* to an airdrop by South African soldiers.'[37] [Emphasis added.]

37 Telegram post, 'Majriyyat ahdath 2021,' Source: ExTrac, 15 August 2021, 1007 BST.

Munasir commentary often takes a more analytical tone than this, sometimes drawing on reporting from 'enemy sources.' For example, in the aftermath of IS-M's August retreat from the city of Mocímboa da Praia, one military-focused influencer wrote:

'#Mozambique:

The account of a local source close to the Mozambican army about what happened in the battle for control of the city of Mocímboa da Praia:

Joint ground forces from Rwanda and Mozambique advanced west of the city, where they were attacked by small groups of Muslims [i.e., IS-M militants] on 1/8/2021.

On the following day, 2/8/2021, joint military forces from Mozambique and Rwanda came aboard gunboats from the city of Pemba towards the eastern part of the city in an attempt to carry out an amphibious operation. They were severely attacked by groups belonging to [IS-M], forcing them to call in helicopters to help support the amphibious forces.

On the following day, 3/8/2021, violent fighting erupted throughout the day between the militants and combined forces inside the city, which led to the removal of the militants from the city of Mocímboa da Praia on 4/8/2021.

No pictures of dead bodies appeared inside the city [and we are] waiting for the official [Islamic State] media to know the true story of what happened.'[38]

Figure 10. *Munasirin* discuss recent conflict developments in Mozambique.

38 Telegram post, 'Al-'ilami,' Source: ExTrac, 12 August 2021, 1421 BST.

Figure 11. Anti-Rwanda campaign poster shared by *munasirin* on Telegram.

While *munasir*-sourced conflict reports tend to take a more speculative tone than official IS-M reporting, they are nevertheless orientated towards achieving similar goals – that is, to demonstrate that IS-M is a dynamic and relevant power-broker in Mozambique, one that is perpetually fighting back against centuries of Muslim victimisation and resource exploitation. On that basis, they focus on territorial inroads and enemy losses, emphasising, where possible, the conventional strategic capabilities of IS-M.

Implicit to all such commentary is the idea that IS-M's local successes in Mozambique are global successes for the Islamic State writ large. This is because it is customary – encouraged even – for *munasirin*-produced content to tie the overarching prospects of the global caliphate project to the local triumphs of individual *wilayat*.

Defensive Jihad

Complementary to the 'IS-M capability' discourse, another core topic driving *munasirin* discussion of Mozambique is the idea that it is fighting back against a Crusader threat – specifically, the majority-Christian armies that have assembled against it in recent months – with a view to ending the persecution of Muslims in the region.

This line of reasoning plays upon pre-existing, and deeply rooted, ethno-religious tensions in Mozambique and its neighbouring countries. It is geared towards exaggerating the grievances that lie at the heart of Cabo Delgado's insurrection and embedding them within the Islamic State's broader strategic narrative of *jihad* – i.e., that it and its affiliates are fighting back against a global war on Islam.

The main target of *munasirin* ire of late has been the Rwandan state and its security forces. In response to its involvement in counter-IS-M operations – something which precipitated a series of territorial setbacks for the group in late July and August, including its ejection from Mocímboa da Praia – *munasirin* launched a 'Crimes of Rwanda' campaign across their networks on Telegram and Rocket.Chat, producing dozens of videos and posters and editorialising extensively about its historic 'crimes against Islam.'

Figure 12. *Munasir*-produced poster inciting violence from Rwandan Muslims.

Figure 13. Anti-Rwanda campaign poster shared by *munasirin* on Telegram.

On 12 August, for example, several *munasirin*-run media foundations posted a message announcing their engagement in the campaign. It read:

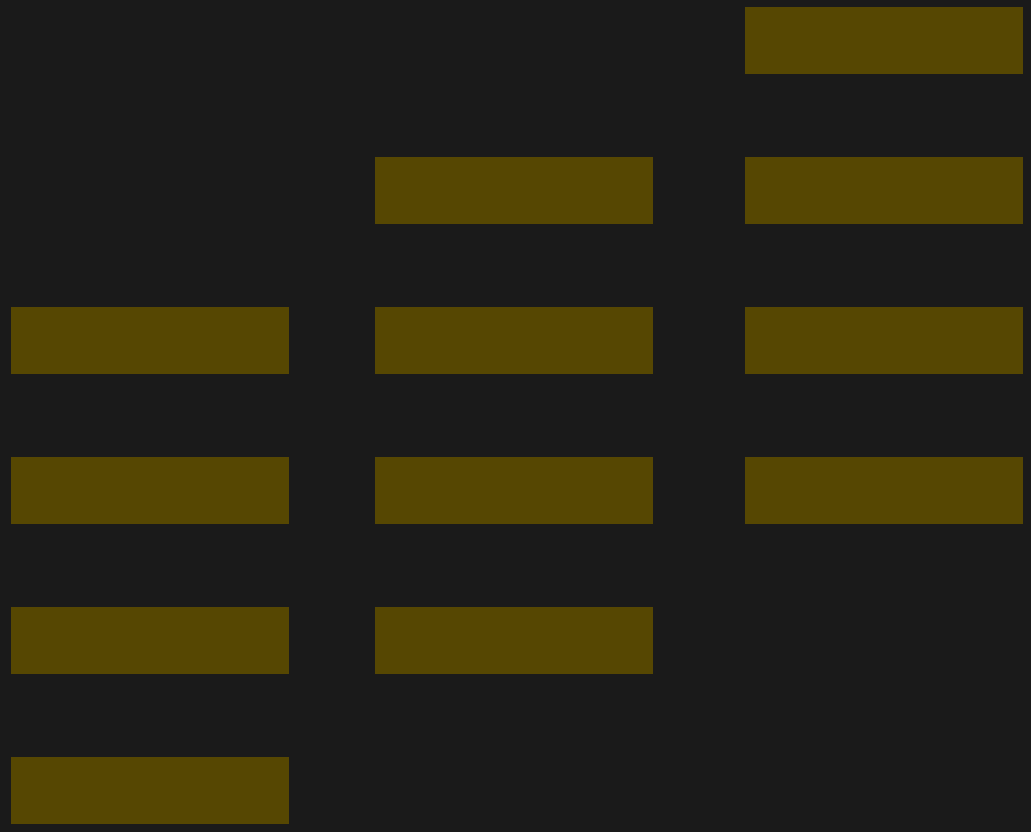
'#Christian_crimes_Rwanda

A campaign launched by your honourable brothers: take part in it, defend your Muslim brothers, to whom the Christians of the Rwanda region are doing vicious crimes because they unite under the banner of Allah the Almighty and testify to His Prophet, may Allah bless Him and grant Him peace.

Spread the message about them, threaten, incite, be patient, and support your brothers as you would like to be supported.'[39]

That Islamic State supporters outside of IS-M's immediate sphere of influence have been coming to its defence in this manner is entirely in line with how the broader *munasirin* community has behaved in recent years. Not only do these campaigns have the nominal effect of 'supporting' distant pro-Islamic State agendas, by simply existing they tie IS-M's prospects to those of the global caliphate movement, which could prove to be fundamental to how its operations evolve in years to come.

39 Telegram post, 'Rasd,' Source: ExTrac, 12 August 2021, 1804 BST.



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