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African responses to the insurgency in northern Mozambique

Background

Insurgency is a common reference to label armed opposition to unpopular and locally perceived illegitimate governments in Africa. However, the tension between local perception and internationally recognised governments often delegitimizes the cause and means of the insurgents taking up arms against an internationally recognised government. The case of Mozambique exemplifies this stance with the governing party, FRELIMO, having won a locally contested election victory in 2019 enjoying international recognition. Locally, elements of the main opposition RENAMO, contests the election result, and threatens to once again take up the armed struggle. Simultaneously, external radicalised elements like [Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jammah \(ASWJ\)](#), [supported by the Central African chapter of the Islamic State](#), (IS) infiltrated the emergent insurgency in northern Mozambique and immediately raised its profile beyond mere local unrest in the Cabo Delgado province.

As outlined in *African insurgencies: From the colonial era to the 21st century*, the history of African insurgencies is long and few countries on the continent did not pass through the crucible of insurgency as a strategy towards independence. The 21st century, however, still reflects a host of insurgencies in different African regions. To the north of Southern Africa, the SAHEL, Horn of Africa, West Africa, as well as the Great Lakes Region all harbour one or more fully blown insurgencies or armed fighting drawing upon elements of insurgency with the [Islamic State](#) increasingly directing, funding and radicalising African insurgencies. While it appears that the Mozambique government is responding in force and is assembling a variety of actors in support, this raises questions about the somewhat opaque role of the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

Discussion

Although Southern Africa saw its last destructive insurgency terminated in 2002 when Angolan forces [defeated UNITA](#), events in northern Mozambique since 2015/2016 again raise the spectre of a [destructive insurgency](#) in a state that itself emerged from an anti-colonial insurgency.

Northern Mozambique and especially [Cabo Delgado and Niassa](#) played a central role in the anti-colonial struggle against the Portuguese. For the governing party, FRELIMO, these provinces have an important historical significance since they provided bases for FRELIMO insurgents that could also make use of the proximity of the Tanzanian border to seek refuge. However, the Muslim dominated provinces have historically and in economic terms been [marginalised](#) and the role of Muslim communities in the northern provinces, Cabo Delgado in particular, is underplayed in narratives about FRELIMO and the liberation of Mozambique. In this lies one explanation for the current conflict, where elements of a marginalised Muslim community take up arms against what is perceived to be a corrupt FRELIMO at the centre.

Since August 2017, activities in the north came to be associated with [radicalization with religious undertones](#). Subsequently, government forces flooded the area, [private security contractors](#) emerged as part of the counter-strategy while violence against civilians grew and insurgents even conducted [a land-sea assault](#) during March 2020 to occupy the harbour town of Mocimboa da Praia. The aforementioned actor spectrum and violence feature alongside multiple multinational corporations exploring and developing the [vast gas deposits found in the region](#) that brings the often-fateful resource curse into the picture. In addition, northern Mozambique is central in the illegal transshipment and [smuggling of illegal drugs](#). Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is one of the reasons why the government has been slow in its response to the growing threat, since [high-level government officials](#) are said to be directly involved in the illegal activities.

In February 2020, the [AU took official note](#) of the insurgency and its escalating violence alongside possible IS involvement when the Summit in Addis Ababa recognized that the AU should assist the government of Mozambique. The May 2020 decision by [Tanzania to deploy troops](#) on its border with Mozambique illustrates the high level of threat that the insurgency presents not only to Mozambique, but to regional countries as well. However, what are the options for SADC and the AU?

During May 2020, Mozambique approached SADC for assistance and so moved away from the earlier stance that the insurgency represents a domestic issue, and not a threat to regional security. On 19 May 2020 during a special Troika meeting, the [SADC Troika and the president of Mozambique](#) met in Harare, Zimbabwe where all recognised the threat to regional security, its jihadist undertones and called for assistance from SADC members. Continental and regional recognition of the threat have now opened avenues for an African response to an African problem. If SADC is preparing a military response in support of the Mozambican government's attempt to curb the growing insurgency, it can help to create a window for a political solution to take place. However, this requires that the Mozambique authorities are willing to address the root causes of the conflict, which it has so far not been willing to do.

Conclusions

The AU, through SADC, has a unique opportunity to step forward as the continental body, and act decisively in a situation that is escalating and threatening regional peace and stability in an arc of SADC that showed it could rid itself from armed aggression. If the idea of African solutions to African problems remains the rallying call, now is the time to act before undue local interests and spoilers clutter the scene. However, lessons from other AU mandated and authorised missions on the continent dictate that a military response alone is not the answer. Any military effort requires disproportionate funding, coordination and combination with programmes tailored to address the root causes that sparked the insurgency. These root causes are more about the lack of good governance and a matter not conveniently blamed on the presence of IS elements.

Suggested further reading: Matsinhe A. & E. Valoi. The genesis of insurgency in northern Mozambique. Southern Africa Report 27. Institute for Security Studies. October 2019.

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