

## MOZAMBIQUE: UPDATE ON INSURGENT OPERATIONS

### Introduction:

Based on analysis of open source reporting, the situation in Northern Mozambique continues on a negative trend since Babel Street’s initial reporting in late June 2020, devolving into a political, commercial, and possible humanitarian crisis. Since June, militants have solidified their hold in the Cabo Delgado region of Mozambique, with insurgents capturing and holding the city of Mocímboa da Praia in early August and now perpetrating attacks on the Afungi peninsula, only miles from energy giant Total’s operations. This has prompted the evacuation of Total’s personnel in late December/early January. Insurgent activity has continued throughout the region, with Al Sunnah wa Jama’ah (ASWJ) increasingly targeting lines of communication and overrunning government outposts. The expansion of insurgent-controlled territory has generated concern about the region being cut off from the rest of the country. New reporting on the insurgency suggests closer connections with the Islamic State (IS), stoking fears that the indigenous insurgents may be receiving support from beyond the borders of Mozambique. Taken collectively, the events of the past six months paint a bleak picture for the government of Mozambique and liquid natural gas (LNG) exploration and production in the region.



Figure 1 - Map of Mozambique and LNG Deposits (source: Total)

### BLUF:



- Insurgent attacks on the Afungi peninsula halt LNG operations and prompt Total’s evacuation of personnel
- Insurgents have solidified their hold of Mocímboa da Praia and continue attacks on transportation networks, essentially cutting off Palma from ground transportation
- Linkages between insurgents and the Islamic State have become more evident
- Illicit trade is likely financing insurgent operations and providing possible logistical link to extremist groups in the Middle East
- Cross border attacks into Tanzania by ASWJ and Tanzanian security operations along the border indicate a growing concern for the insurgency expansion
- The threat to LNG operations remains high despite no direct attacks on LNG sites to date

### Insurgents Hold Mocímboa da Praia, Isolating Palma

A growing number of insurgent attacks across the Palma District of the Cabo Delgado region highlight the dire security situation. In early August, ASWJ militants captured Mocímboa da Praia—the city where the insurgency first flared in October 2017. The city fell to the attackers following a multi-day battle with government forces. By 15 August, the insurgents were in full control of the city. Mozambican security forces have been unable to dislodge the insurgents from the town, and anecdotal reporting indicates that the insurgents plan to use Mocímboa da Praia as the future capital of a possible independent state or a splinter region within Mozambique. With a base of operations secured, insurgents have

launched attacks across Cabo Delgado, directly targeting government forces and their outposts as well as ground transportation networks. Insurgents retain the upper hand in ongoing fighting with government forces. Reports from Zitamar News on 2 October indicate insurgents can operate effectively against security forces, attacking them near Mucojo Sede and Pangane (located approximately 80km South of Mocimboa da Praia). Mozambican forces were only able to fend off insurgent advances with the aid of air support, believed to be provided from the private military contractor (PMC) Dyck Advisory Group (DAG), who has reportedly been operating helicopters in support of the government forces. One Mozambican senior military official stated ambushes by the militants have been executed using “heavy weapons” and hit and run tactics. Those attacks have been very successful.

During the 2 October fighting, insurgents were able to overwhelm security forces and burn government buildings after helicopter support departed. Social media posts on 20 December reference the PMC helicopters’ effectiveness as being greatly limited by their fuel supply and the need to refuel in Pemba - over 185km from most of the fighting (Figure 2). While Mozambican security forces appear to have the technical advantage over the insurgents (e.g., armored vehicles and aerial support), their inability to bring these capabilities to bear in the conflict have not translated into a tactical advantage or success on the battlefield. As the insurgents control more territory, the overall effectiveness of the PMC-provided helicopter support is expected to wane due to their limited loiter time. This does not bode well for Mozambican ground forces.

Accessing areas within Cabo Delgado has become increasingly difficult since the insurgents took control of Mocimboa da Praia and increased their operations across northern Mozambique. IntelCenter reporting indicates insurgents have targeted vehicles and highways recently. From January to July of 2020, IntelCenter reporting specifies 26 events referencing vehicles and highways, with 14 reports occurring from the end of August to the end of October. IntelCenter did not report any attacks referring to roads or vehicles during July or the first 29 days of August, indicating a spike of activity in September and October (Figure 3). Violence concentrated against ground lines of communication has essentially crippled the main transportation route in the region. During the siege of Mocimboa da Praia in early August, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) indicated that Mozambican security forces were unable to mount an effective counteroffensive due to an inability to move troops across the region’s roads.

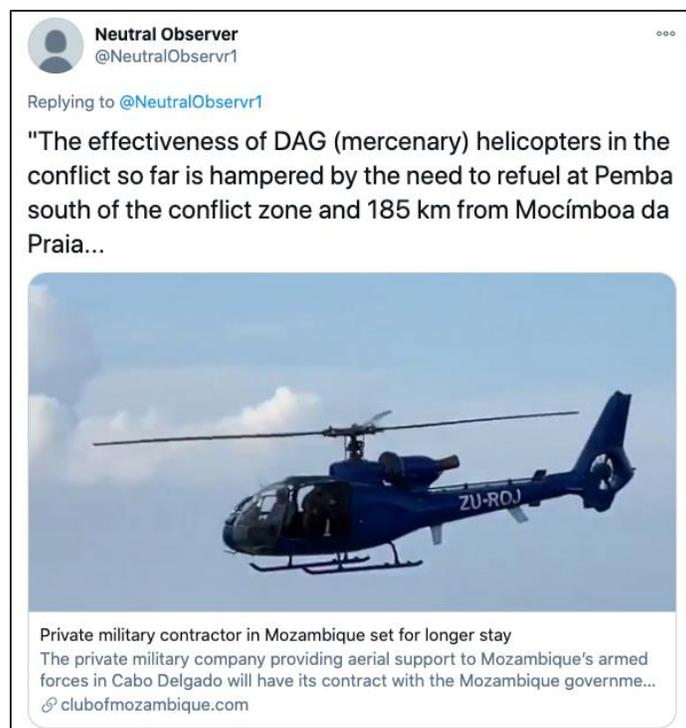


Figure 2 - Social media post referring to DAG helicopter range

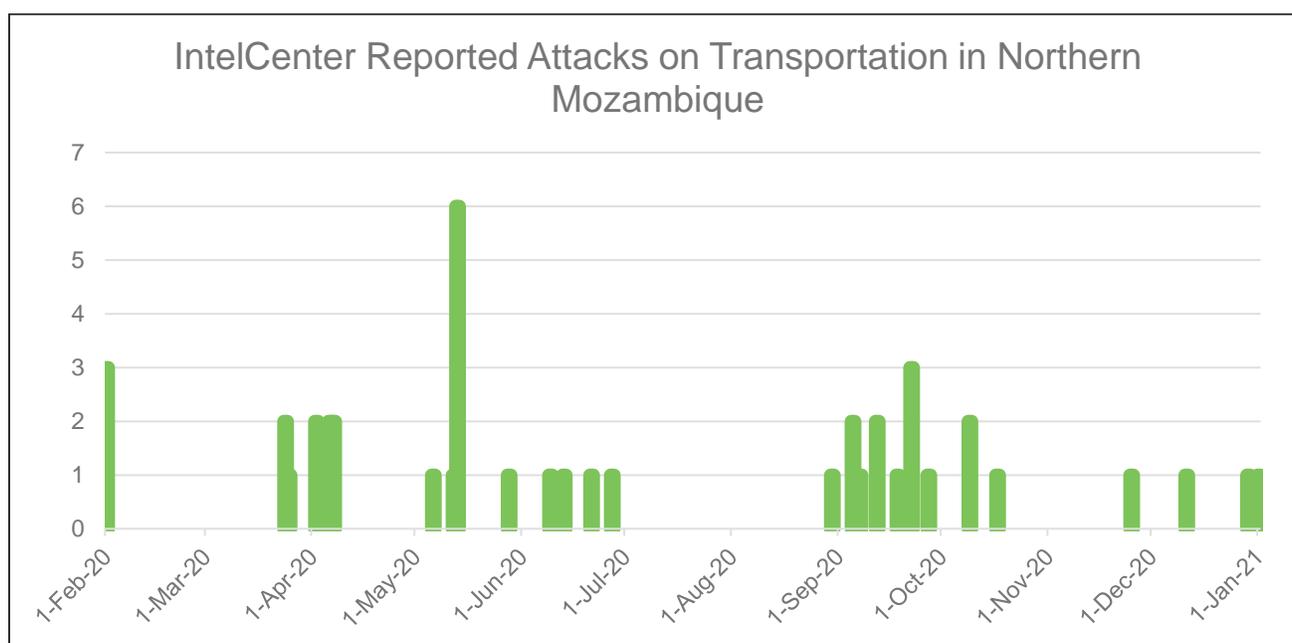


Figure 3

The inability to safely travel has left the town of Palma, located approximately 40km north of Mocimboa da Praia, especially isolated. The city has become a hub of activity in recent years, supporting nearby LNG operations. Russian reports from Palma on Telegram (Figure 4) on 24 September indicate that the city is under a daily curfew starting at 5:30pm. Citizens are also reporting the scarcity of necessities such as food and household goods. Violence in the area, including the mid-September beheading of a Bengali vendor attempting to restock supplies, has likely prompted Bengali merchants—normally the suppliers of many common goods and food—to flee the area or cease operation. The insurgent attacks on transportation persist, as the chart (Figure 3) above highlights the number of attacks reported on transportation infrastructure spiking between September and October, with another uptick noted at the end of the year correlating with ASWJ's recent push towards the LNG production areas.

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После захвата боевиками ИГ города Мосимбоа-да-Прая населенный пункт Пальма, находящийся на самом севере провинции Кабу-Делгаду, фактически оказался в сухопутной блокаде. Несмотря на то, что вокруг города сосредоточена инфраструктура для международного проекта по добыче СПГ, в Пальме возникли проблемы как с безопасностью, так и с продовольствием.

По словам местных жителей, населению запрещается покидать свои дома после 17:30 по местному времени, даже если это – поход в находящийся на домовом участке уличный туалет. В магазинах заканчиваются продукты первой необходимости: ранее их продавали бенгалцы, но теперь они закрывают свои магазины и покидают регион.

В регионе присутствует большое число подразделений сил безопасности, однако большая их часть развернута в районе объектов по добыче СПГ. Из-за этого местные жители практически не надеются на помощь армии и полиции в случае нападения

боевиков ИГ.  
#Африка #Мозамбик  
@rybar

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After the seizure of the city of Mosimboa da Praia by IS militants, the settlement of Palma, located in the very north of the province of Cabo Delgado, actually found itself in a land blockade. Although the infrastructure for an international LNG project is concentrated around the city, Palma has faced both security and food issues.

According to local residents, the population is prohibited from leaving their homes after 17:30 local time, even if it is a trip to the street toilet located on the house plot. The stores are running out of essential products: Bengalis used to sell them, but now they are closing their stores and leaving the region.

There are a large number of security forces in the region, but most of them are deployed in the area of LNG production facilities. Because of this, local residents have little hope for the help of the army and police in the event of an IS attack.

#Africa #Mozambique  
@rybar

Figure 4: Russian-language Telegram post and English translation referencing situation on the ground in Palma

Reporting on 4 October from the newsletter “Mozambique News Reports & Clippings” paints a similar picture in Palma, with the curfew starting earlier in the day, at 4pm, accompanied by reports of locals being issued arms to form a militia. The town had been without stable electricity since late September as the electrical lines into town were damaged and could not be repaired. Electrical generators in town have reportedly run out of fuel. The newsletter also reports that the road in and out of Palma has come under regular attack, making air travel the only reliable path into the city. Pinnacle News reported that Palma has been completely cut off from ground transportation as of the evening of 26 October, stating that many drivers are unwilling to take to the roads. Reports of fuel prices skyrocketing over 630% with a liter of fuel costing approximately USD 5.48 in Palma when compared to a liter of fuel in the capital of Maputo (USD 0.86), indicating the scarcity of basic items. Reports also show that energy giant Total is building a fortified security barrier around its facilities on the Afungi peninsula, located outside of Palma, further highlighting the devolving security situation

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Figure 5 (Source: Conexão Moz)

(Figure 5), which at this stage serves as the final line of demarcation between the insurgents and the LNG operations. The dire conditions are underscored by Mozambican government estimates that over 560,000 residents have now fled the region and famine could be a reality across northern Mozambique. Especially as the rainy season comes into full swing, normally occurring between January and March, weather conditions will likely limit the ability to move material throughout the region.

## Insurgents Attack Afungi Peninsula, Halting LNG Operations

From 23 December – 29 December there were a series of attacks on the Afungi peninsula, beginning in the small village of Mute, then Olumbe, and finally Monjane, located less than 5 km from a Total construction camp. According to reports, Total initially began to evacuate personnel on 1 January when approximately 500 expatriate employees were flown to Pemba on chartered flights. Local employees have been instructed to stay home. Estimates of Total’s workforce on the Afungi peninsula are around 3,000 people. With renewed attacks in early January, Total has accelerated its evacuation efforts. Additional open-source reporting indicates that attacks continued in the area on 1-2 January. Burning fires in Olumbe can be seen on satellite imagery—indicating recent insurgent activity. Zitamar News reported that these attacks prompted Total to suspend work and “cut back operations to a bare minimum, evacuating staff and contractors by air.” The number of remaining staff is unclear despite reporting indicating that none of the insurgent attacks have yet penetrated the Total perimeter fence.

Recent reports state that insurgents distributed written notes with claims of plans to attack the larger town of Palma on 5 January and advised the population to leave, but as of the date of this writing there has been no indication that these attacks have been carried out. Insurgents have used these types of threatening tactics before previous deadly attacks and these threats should not be considered aspirational. Control of Palma appears to be the near-term goal of the insurgency. Beyond the insurgents’ struggle for control of the region, the attacks have reportedly taken on a subsistence aspect, reportedly due to the rainy season’s impact on the group’s ability to secure supplies. Specifically, they appear to be stocking up on supplies by raiding local villages and government camps. The nature of raids may be indications of a seasonal slowdown in the fighting; however, inclement weather that would impact the insurgent’s mobility during the rainy season will likely have a similar impact on the Mozambican security forces. Insurgents’ pursuit of food supplies should not be perceived as a sign of weakness, but instead an indicator of environmental challenges facing the region. Overall, the recent events paint a very bleak picture of the security environment, and that is unlikely to change over the near term.

## IS and the Nature of the Insurgency

Reported linkages between ASWJ and the Islamic State continue to grow. Specifically, the IS news outlet, Amaq News Agency continues to report successful battlefield stories, such as on 5 September, reporting that IS fighters killed or injured 20 soldiers, allegedly from Mozambique and Tanzania during clashes near Mocimboa da Praia. ASWJ’s use of brutal tactics such as beheadings, kidnappings, and even reporting of insurgents paying a group of elderly civilians to leave and not return appear to mirror similar tactics used by IS globally. These reports bolster concerns that insurgents are attempting to build an autonomous territory or perhaps a religious caliphate in Mozambique. The militants’ ultra-violent tactics also point to a possible link with IS given the Islamic State commonly uses and celebrates such brutal methods.

Furthermore, the Islamic State released an infographic in early October claiming that since the start of 2020 its soldiers have carried out 118 attacks, killed 941 people, and injured 909 in Mozambique. The infographic also referenced attacks and killings in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania, highlighting not just a focus on Mozambique, but the possible wider attempt to co-opt local militants across Africa into a larger play for an African caliphate.

Since Babel Street’s initial analysis of the insurgency, IS involvement in the current conflict has become clearer. Both the local insurgents and the Islamic State appear to be attempting to make connections with each other. Media statements in Amaq plus insurgents’ use of the Islamic State flag, among other indications, point to a stronger connection—at least in terms of ideology and goals if not in logistical and operational support. While reports of direct funding, training, and provisioning of equipment from IS still have not surfaced in open-source reporting, the deepening affiliation between the groups makes such moves more likely in the future. Currently, the situation on the ground reflects

a local struggle that has gained the attention of the Islamic State and could be a key feature in the group's activities in Eastern Africa.

Even as the connection between the Islamic State and ASWJ appear more defined, relatively little has been reported on the actual composition of the insurgents. Fortunately, the Center for Investigative Journalism (CIJ) located in Maputo, Mozambique, released two articles in late September and Pinnacle News released an article in late October that describes the insurgency at the local level and helps make sense of the larger conflict. One CIJ report detailed the background of two of the insurgency's leaders, both local Mozambicans, born in the current conflict area of Northern Mozambique. Both leaders claim that during their younger years, they traveled abroad for religious education and one of the leaders claimed to have received training in insurgency operations in Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo. CIJ reporting also indicated that the local Mozambican security has been penetrated or compromised by the insurgent group. Allegedly, security force movements are regularly reported, and insurgents have even received logistical support from government sources. Indeed, CIJ specifically highlighted that insurgents even wear similar uniforms to that of the Mozambican forces. The Pinnacle News report details the recruiting process of the insurgency and tells a story of local young men being attracted to fight for the group for monetary gain. The recruits appear to be radicalized into ASWJ through their cell phones and promises of riches, with a family member reporting that the recruit no longer wears Rasta-style hair due to strict guidelines of the group, indicating possible similarities with IS and other extremist groups.

### Possible Financing Role of Illicit Trade and Heroin Trafficking

Another possible link between the Islamic State and other outside actors lies in the drug trade. The Global Initiative on Transnational Crime released a report in June of 2020, highlighting both historical and current illicit trade trends across the Swahili coast, which covers both Mozambique and Tanzania. The report highlights the ongoing role Cabo Delgado province plays in the international drug trade. The area has also been known to be a transshipment point for heroin for future movement to other parts of Africa or Europe and North America. The size and breadth of the shipments were highlighted by media reporting in December 2019 where Mozambican Navy and Defense forces interdicted over two tons of heroin from two ships believed to be bound for Africa. Of particular interest, according to Research on Islam and Muslims in Africa, as many as 90 IS fighters may have escorted a heroin shipment to Mozambique in July of 2019. Also, IntelCenter recently reported that a source within the Mozambican prosecutor's office alleges that 12 Iranians were captured off the coast of Pemba in December 2019. The group was carrying several small arms likely bound for the region, but their intent was unclear. Specifically, it is not known if they were directly connected to ASWJ activities or simply trafficking the weapons or supporting some other illegal trade. Regardless, as more reports surface, the ASWJ support network and outside revenue streams will likely become clearer as the group receives wider attention from outside media sources. If IS or other outside actors continue to use Cabo Delgado as a transshipment point, direct contact or logistical support to ASWJ would likely increase.

Such illicit trade not only provides a possible direct connection to IS; the drug trade might also serve as a key funding stream for ASWJ. Reporting indicates that the insurgents may not directly control the movement of illicit drugs, but likely levy taxes on product that passes through their areas of control, generating significant cash flow. The Mozambican news website The Club of Mozambique notes a growing trend in the sophistication of insurgents over the past three years; the group traveled on old scooters with machetes in 2017 but is now roving the countryside with new SUVs and using automatic weapons. Involvement in the drug trade could be financing these improved capabilities.

### Tanzanian Involvement Indicates Growing Intensity

Multiple media sources reported that during the evening of 14 October a force of approximately 300 militants crossed from Mozambique into Tanzania and attacked the town of Kitaya. The fighters allegedly beheaded approximately 20 people, raided the local military armory, and identified themselves as "Al-Shabaab from Mozambique," as the group is known locally. The insurgency previously crossed into Tanzania once before during November of 2019, but this most recent attack was much larger—leaving more dead—and appeared to have political motivations based on videos of insurgents destroying posters of the Tanzanian president. While violence spilling across the border is not unprecedented, this attack indicates an escalation of the insurgency and a sign that the group continues to expand its operations.

The 14 October attack portrays only half of the larger cross-border conflict, and the attack may have been an insurgent response to Tanzanian cross-border security operations. Previously, ACLED referenced reports in their newsletter that Tanzanian forces have been conducting counter-terrorism operations along the border with Mozambique, with a report of security forces stopping a group of insurgents from crossing the border on 12 August. Additionally, an unsubstantiated Amaq news report claimed 20 Tanzanian border forces were killed in Mocimboa da Praia on 5 September. If the Amaq report is correct, it would represent a major development for Tanzanian troops to be present deep inside (over 80km) Mozambique conducting operations, and if accurate, it could signal the involvement of regional actors in the growing conflict. The overall validity of the Amaq news report cannot be verified, but it appears to at the very least point to increased fighting between ASWJ and Tanzanian security forces. The attack into Tanzania and the possible involvement of Tanzanian troops without the explicit direction of the government of Mozambique would violate Mozambique's

sovereignty, potentially escalating the conflict into the international arena and increasing the likelihood of involvement of additional international parties. Continued cross border attacks and Tanzanian troop involvement in Mozambican territory serves as a clear concern going forward.

## Future Impacts on LNG Operations

In light of the recent reporting, the operating environment for any LNG operations in Mozambique is directly under threat. Despite initial reports that Total's operations have not been directly targeted by insurgents, the threat remains extreme as indicated by Total's decision to essentially cease operations. Reports from Zitamar News on its Telegram account indicate that on 24 August, Total signed a new memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Mozambican Joint Task Force to provide security for their operations in Cabo Delgado. Based on reporting in the Financial Times, it appears Total is subsidizing Mozambique's security efforts in the region to protect its operations. While Total looks committed to Cabo Delgado operations for now, despite their current stoppage of work on the Afungi peninsula, Exxon Mobil has not signed the most recent MOU, indicating that the devolving situation appears to have decreased international appetite for the development of the region. Furthermore, Exxon Mobil has delayed its final decision about investing in the region.

The Violence at Sea report published in August indicates that ASWJ already utilizes coastal maritime operations as part of their normal operations. The recent growth of capabilities was demonstrated by insurgents when carrying out attacks in the Quirimbas Islands, which are situated between the coast and some of the South Eastern LNG deposits. The intersection of insurgent maritime activity, proximal French territory, and vast LNG deposits being explored by the French oil company Total, may provide the impetus for the French military to become involved, at least in the maritime space. Unconfirmed, open-source reporting speculated about the possible involvement of the French Navy being deployed to secure the French territory of Mayotte, located over 500km due East of Mozambique. The report, while unsubstantiated, may align with the geopolitical issues of the conflict as Mayotte lies proximal to the conflict zone and directly East of the LNG deposits being explored by the French oil company Total. Also, regional examples, such as Somali pirates, who were able to use locally available assets to conduct persistent, over the horizon attacks on commercial shipping traffic, represent a worst-case scenario for LNG operations in the region. French deployment of naval forces to the region could indicate the growth in ASWJ's maritime capability and should be monitored as a warning of the conflict possibly moving offshore. Multiple open-source reports collected indicate that the insurgents continue to move freely using small vessels up and down the coastline and have perpetrated small scale attacks against coastal towns, with a single report on social media indicating that the insurgents may have attacked naval vessels off the Mozambican coast on 27 December, highlighting the persistent and possibly emboldened maritime capability of ASWJ.

## Conclusion

The insurgent control over Mocimboa da Praia is expanding. The insurgents' ability to confront and defeat local government security forces and the PMCs charged with rooting them out appears to be growing by the day. Increased attacks, incursions into Tanzania, new maritime activities, and apparent linkages to international terrorist organizations decrease the likelihood of the conflict being handled internally, with a resultant effect of continued disruption of LNG operations in the near term. These developments are stark indicators that the conflict is growing beyond the ability to be controlled domestically – and a further indication that ASWJ's impact on the region has increased to a point well beyond Mozambican control. Based on the situation in Cabo Delgado, it is likely that the trend of insurgent violence will continue, and without any major changes to the Mozambican counter-insurgency operations, the security environment will likely continue deteriorating over the near to medium term.

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