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Forgotten Cape – Extremist violence in Northern Mozambique

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Abstract

Aim: The aim of the study is to provide an overview of the violent extremist insurgency in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province with a special emphasis on developments in 2023 and 2024.

Methodology: The study is based on the review of secondary literature, open source information, as well as Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project's (ACLED) relevant data.

Findings: The study confirms the recommendations of previous research regarding the importance of a holistic approach to anti-insurgency operations. The study found that despite achieving successes on the battlefield, the government of Mozambique has failed to address the root causes of the insurgency and to pursue a well-rounded policy which in turn allowed the insurgents to rebuild and conduct more operations in the first months of 2024. The study outlines the importance of adapting one's approach to the devising and the implementation of an anti-insurgency strategy in response to changing circumstances and new information

Value: By 2021, both scholarly and mainstream media took notice of the violent extremists' activities which by that point had displaced over 800,000 people. However, with Mozambique's call for help to the international community and a string of victories on the battlefield, the insurgency essentially disappeared from mainstream discourse. This study fills this gap and provides an up-to-date summary of the insurgency's activities as well as tentative confirmation of the validity of previous research.

Keywords: ISIS; Cabo Delgado; insurgency; anti-insurgency; terrorism

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Introduction

Cabo Delgado, a province in Northern Mozambique has been plagued by violence since at least 2017, when a local group of armed insurgents took control of a major urban centre of the region, igniting international interest.[1] By this point, hundreds of thousands of people had been forced off their homelands and the number of people killed, displaced, or otherwise brutalised incessantly increased. Interest in the group peaked in the late spring-summer of 2021, however, it rapidly dropped off the radar of international audiences. Similarly, a survey of the secondary literature shows that most papers were published in 2021-2022. Many of these studies focus on specific aspects of the insurgency – its origins, its financing, its recruitment or military strategy. However, the rapidly changing situation on the ground means that there is a crucial gap in the literature. My research brings together earlier research on the roots and first years of the insurgency with an analysis of their activities over the course of 2023 and the first three months of 2024. The central argument of the paper is that keeping channels of information open – both domestically as well as internationally – is crucial in devising a working counter-insurgency strategy.

In order to fill the gap in our understanding of the insurgency, this paper will survey the scholarly literature on the issue as well as utilising ACLED's violence monitoring activity from the past 15 months. The first part of the paper will introduce the various roots of the insurgency and demonstrate the web of conditions as well as catalysts that led to the eruption of violence. The second part will analyse the government's responses to the crises, how this approach changed – and more importantly, in what respects it failed to do so. The third part will provide a summary of the last year of the insurgency in order to demonstrate that counter-insurgency measures have not reached their goals. Through these three parts, the paper will contribute to the existing literature by bringing it together with data provided and analysis available for the last 15 months. By doing so, it becomes evident that adapting one's approach to the devising and the implementation of an anti-insurgency strategy in response to changing circumstances and new information is of paramount importance.

1 This group of insurgents has been called many names. Locally it was first known as Al Shabaab (The Youth), they also used the name Ahlu Sunna wa al Jama'a (ASWJ, the People of the Sunnah and the Community), or ISCA/ISCAP/IS-M (various Islamic State's affiliates). Additionally, they have been named in various studies 'insurgents', 'violent extremists', 'Jihadists', 'terrorist', 'criminals', or simply 'bandits'. For clarity, the study predominantly uses 'insurgents', but occasionally features others of the above-mentioned names too.

Part 1 – Roots of the violence

The violence in Cabo Delgado has roots stretching back decades. In orderto provide a balanced view of this complicated issue, this study will draw on and expand upon the work of Emily Estelle and Jessica Trisko Darden (2021), who identified the key 'conditions' and 'catalysts' of the insurgency. This current study draws on wider research to expand upon this framework, while keeping in mind that this is the most researched part of the issue, thus it is impossible to address every aspect. This section argues that a poor understanding of the complex challenges that failed Cabo Delgado for decades meant that resentment compounded within the community and eventually led to the outbreak of the insurgency.

Table 1.
Conditions and Catalysts of the Cabo Delago Insurgency

Conditions	Catalysts
Poor Governance · Politcal marginalization · Lingering effects of prior conflicts · Sercurity-sector vulnerabilities	**Poor Governance** · Fegyveres fellépés a régiók szakadár csoportjai ellen · A felkelés korai szakaszának hibás kezelése
Economic Marginalization · Corruption or cronyism · Lack of jobs leading to delayed social advancement · Underinvestment in service provision	**Economic Marginalization** · Simultaneous disruption of multiple local industries due to natural disasters and industrial consolidation · High expectations for local benefits from LNG development
Ethnic, Class, and Religious Tensions · Generation divide in Musim population · Influence of foreeign-funded Wahhabi education · Prior cennection to East African Islamist network · Fragmentation of Makonde, Makuhwa, and Mwani speakers	**Ethnic, Class, and Religious Tensions** · Inputs from Tanzanian Salafi-jihadi network

Note. Estelle & Darden, 2021.

The lingering effects of prior conflicts underlie issues related to poor governance. Following the war of independence (1964-1974), Mozambique found itself in a decades-long civil war, which ended with the 1992 Rome General Peace Accords. The shortcomings of the peace process were exhaustively analysed by Cyprian Muchemwa and Geoffrey Thomas Harris (2019). It is crucial to point out that the disarmament of various groups has not been vigorously pursued – neither in a physical nor in a psychological sense, therefore a 'culture of peace' never really took root (Faleg, 2019).

The political marginalization of certain groups – religious differences overlaying ethno-linguistic ones (Estelle & Darden, 2021; Dembele, 2020) – carried on from the Portuguese times. During the colonial period, the preferential

treatment of the Makonde ethnic group led to a resentment that was only exacerbated as the communist party, FRELIMO (eventually emerging victorious from the civil war) similarly disadvantaged (Israel, 2020) the other main ethnic community of the province (the Mwani). The post-colonial history of many African countries is rife with examples of conflicts arising as the residual effects of colonial policies – the cases of the Igbo in Nigeria and the Tigrayan in Ethiopia are just two examples of the bloodiest ones.

Besides the lack of disarmament, the porousness of borders with neighbouring countries (Barnett, 2020) as well as the financial precarity faced by police and military personnel (Nhamirre, 2021) meant that the security infrastructure was vulnerable both from the outside and the inside. Additionally, there was a perception among the local population that the army and the military protect the interests of the wealthy and misuse their power (Alberdi & Barroso, 2021), therefore the relation between the armed forces and the civilians was strained from the very beginning.

The fact that the military and the police were (*are*) seriously underpaid is intimately connected to corruption and cronyism. These are features spanning "the width and depth" (Lucey & Patel, 2021) of Mozambique's state apparatus, making the armed forces susceptible to interference from third parties and breeding resentment among the local population (Hayson, 2018). Additionally, the local economy of the northern province is characterised by pervasive illicit trade and a wider informality, creating conditions in which the financing of violent extremism is difficult to reign in (Habibe et al., 2019).

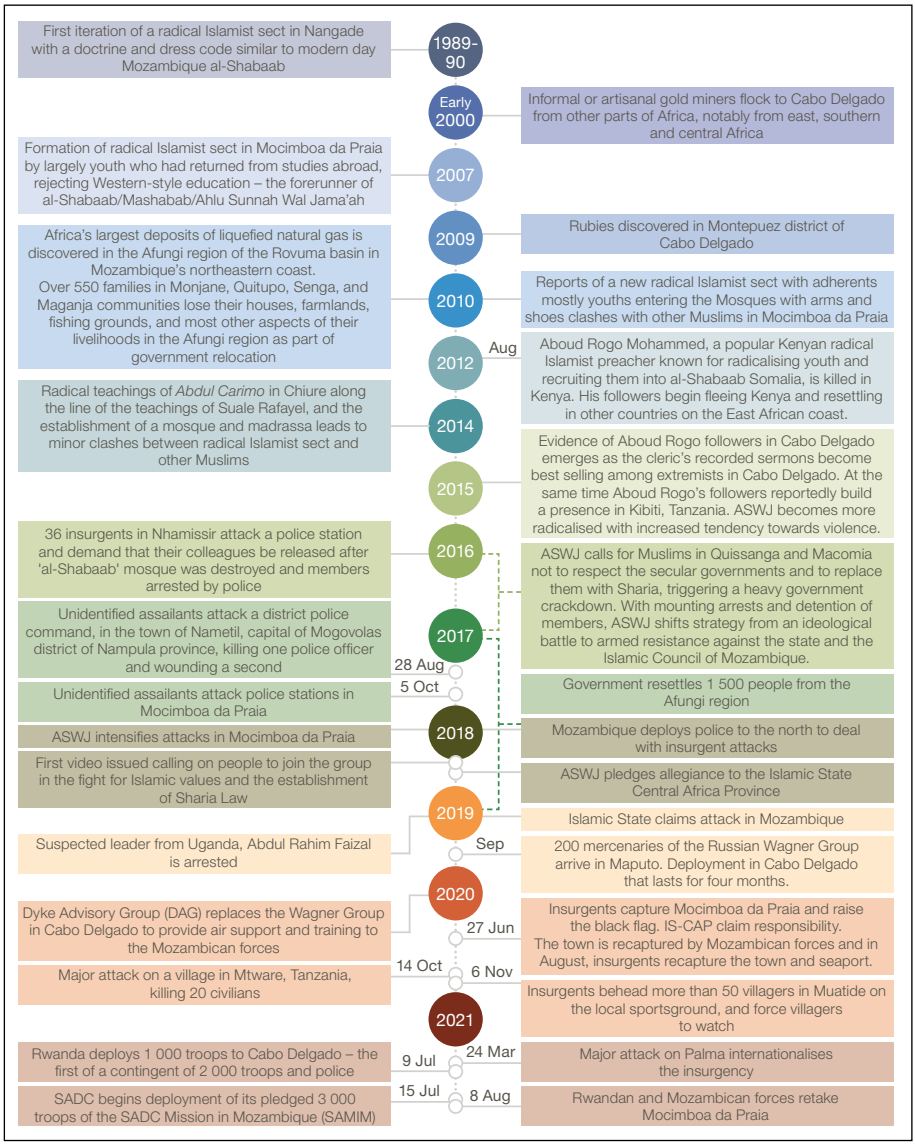
Ranking at the bottom of most social indicators even within Mozambique, Cabo Delgado is referred to by some as Cabo Esquecido – Forgotten Cape (Matsinhe & Valoi, 2019). The underdevelopment of the region was not addressed by any of the governments since independence, and decades of 'systematic neglect' (Azani &Duchan, 2020) has left a large part of the local population in a precarious economic and social situation. The infrastructure and food security of the province was further shattered in the years leading up to the conflict due to cyclones, floods and a series of health crises (Meek & Nene, 2021). The state failed to listen to local people about their needs, even as they tried to warn about the insurgency (Boerekamp et al., 2022).

Furthermore, a rapidly growing population led to the number of young people without stable incomes skyrocketing, coupled with the lack of prospects and hopelessness, forming a hotbed for extremist agitation. This demographic change also led to a sharpening of generational conflicts, most notably manifesting itself in the 'traditional leadership out of touch with younger Muslims' (Lister, 2021).

The difference between the 'old' and the 'young' were put on display as a new, more austere and intolerant version of Islam began to gain traction among the youth. Scholars have warned of the potential of conflict between various sects as early as 2009 (Bonate, 2009). Multiple studies chronicled the emergence of this group, their followers were known in the region as 'Al Shabaab', *the young.* These radical preachers also appeared alongside other extremist leaders, linking Cabo Delgado to the wider, although sporadic network of radical Islamist groups. The presence of international elements also gave rise to some early claims pinning the blame for the insurgency on 'foreigners' (mostly Tanzanians) – these claims were later widely debunked and now it is accepted that the 'violence is committed primarily by Mozambicans' (Boerekamp et al., 2022). All these conditions have been present in Cabo Delgado for a prolonged period of time, and the failure of the state to address these issues meant the province was a tinder box ready to ignite.

The catalysts and the early period of the extremist violence is well documented. In the above-mentioned economic situation, discoveries regarding graphite, ruby and natural gas heightened expectations among the local population, however, these hopes shortly proved to be unfounded (Gunaratna & Pethő-Kiss, 2023). Many of these discoveries also led to the displacement of multiple local communities, forcing them to leave their already fragile livelihood behind (Lea, 2023). A 2022 survey conducted showerd that the majority of respondents named the discovery of these raw materials as 'the main drive of the insurgency' (Doxsee et al., 2024), while other studies' respondents named poor governance of said resources as the cause (Boerekamp et al, 2022). Alongside these developments, the government's suppression of Al Shabaab incited rather than pacified the participants – one of the most widely referenced studies on the origins of the insurgency by Eric Morier-Genoud analysed this process in detail (2020). The government responded with a heavy-handed violent crackdown. The escalation from this was quick and took most of the world by off-guard – a timeline compiled by Boerekamp et al. (2022) can be found below.

Figure 1.
Boerekamp's timeline



Note. Boerekamp et al., 2022.

This section showed the roots of the insurgency in Cabo Delgado and enumerated the various conditions that prepared the ground for the insurgency. It has shown that the complex interplay of various conditions created a perfect mix for the insurgency to take root; however, Maputo failed to listen and understand the 'complexity of the problems' (Alberdi & Barroso, 2021). The next section will analyse how the government responded once the insurgency was under way.

Part 2 – Government response and failure

The government's response, from the very beginning, came under scrutiny and eventually, heavy criticism from scholars, experts, and various non-governmental organizations, however, they were either unable or unwilling to heed these recommendations. This section introduces the state of the armed forces at the start of the insurgency, the cycle of violence perpetrated by a variety of actors and finally the situation on the battlefield up to the end of 2022.

In 2017, Mozambican government forces available for deployment were 'disillusioned', 'undisciplined' (Stefanovszky, 2021), lacking weapons and training (Azani & Duchan, 2020), having 'limited resources and capabilities' as well as simply not enough manpower (Estella and Darden, 2021, p. 14). Despite not having the capabilities to crush the insurgency with force, the government deployed a rapid reaction unit of police (Boerekamp et al. 2022), arrested and incarcerated hundreds from the region and an information blockade was instituted (Azani & Duchan, 2020).

Within the army, rival groups appeared to use the insurgency to sabotage their opponents (Dos Santos, 2020). This might also provide an additional explanation (besides corruption) to the fact that there have been reports of army officers passing on information to the extremists (Opperman, 2024a)[2]. Additionally, besides the armed forces, the judiciary and the prosecution also seemingly struggled to cooperate effectively – between 2017 and 2021, less than 38% of the 431 accused of 'terrorism' were convicted (Boerekamp et al., 2022). The increasing polarization of Mozambican politics (Pitcher, 2020) means that bridging these divisions seems unlikely – perhaps even new fissures can appear which then violent extremists can exploit.

2 Interestingly, similar reports about armed officers assisting violent extremists have been circulating in Northern Nigeria for years. Either this signals that armed groups in these places have indeed built up a connection with various officers or that allegations of collaboration inevitably spring up if the state is inefficient.

Following the failure of its own forces to reign in the insurgency, the state brought in private military companies (PMCs), most importantly the Wagner Group, the Dyck Adviser Group and the Paramount and Burnham Global consortium. In the next few years, Maputo was reluctant to accept help from other states, trying to avoid being portrayed as a 'failed state' (Lea, 2023), instead relying on its own military and PMCs. However, given how unsuited and fractured these forces were, they did not win battles, hearts, or minds (Love, 2023).

At the offset, the insurgents primarily targeted either government forces directly or individuals linked to them (Matsinhe & Valoi, 2019), as opposed to indiscriminate killing of civilians or international assets (Heyen-Dubé & Rands, 2022) The army (and later the PMCs) responded with extreme violence. This brutality in turn drove the recruitment of the extremists: 71% of former members joined the insurgency as a result of 'violent or repressive government actions against them or those close to them' (Mangena & Pherudi, 2019).

Responding to 'terrorism with terrorism' (Mutasa & Muchemwa, 2022) over the course of counter-insurgency operations has a long history – the famous brutality of the Black and Tans in Ireland is just one example – and usually results in an increased likelihood of disproportionate violence. The general brutalisation of the population is accentuated by the fact that the army, the police, the private military companies and the insurgents all have committed war crimes (Lea, 2023). As a report by Amnesty International detailed with horrific accuracy, the population of Cabo Delgado is caught up between all the various warring factions, 'none of which respect their protected status' (Amnesty International, 2021). The fact that transnational companies contracted separate private security providers to protect their investments (Feller, 2021) as well as the government's decision to legalise militias to fight against the insurgents (Mooloo, 2023) further complicates the security landscape. The example of the Northern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (where over 120 armed groups operate) can serve as a cautionary tale.

After years of failures on the military front, the government eventually conceded that they needed international help. This was largely prompted by the insurgents' successes, most importantly in taking Mocímboa da Praia town in 2020 and then conducting a large attack on the provincial capital, Palma in March 2021. The constantly changing kaleidoscope of various international troops' involvement has been discussed before (Nharmirre, 2021), for the sake of this study it suffices to say that troops from over 20 countries are present in the country, most importantly from Rwanda and the South African Development Committee (SADC). The Rwandan and SADC forces were deployed in the summer of 2021.

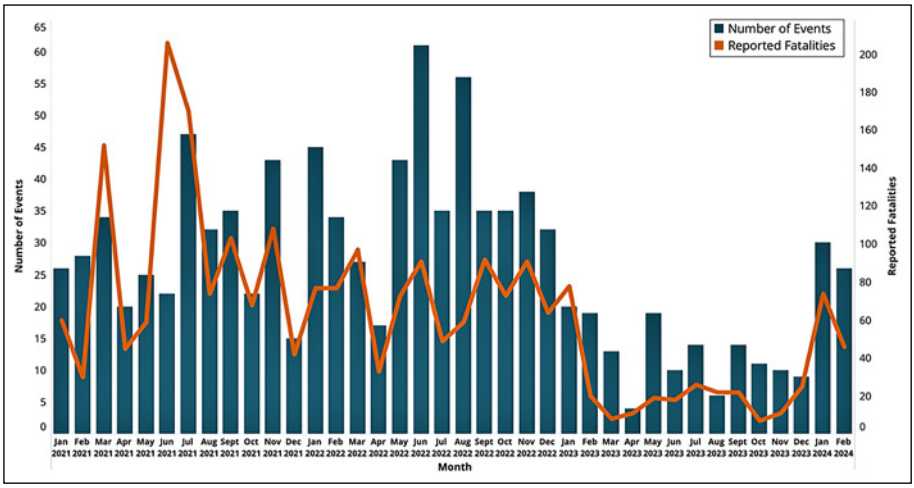
Overall, these better-trained and better-organised troops managed to dismantle 'major bases and seized important territory' (International Crisis Group, 2022) shortly after their deployment in 2021. Following the arrival of more robust counterterrorism forces, the attacks committed by insurgents became more spaced out and the number of casualties declined (Larnerd & Columbo, 2023) However, instead of disappearing, the insurgents simply changed tactics. The next section will examine how the insurgency adapted to the changed conditions on the battlefield and how this led to a return of violence to Cabo Delgado.

Part 3 - A return of violence

Following the surge in violence in the summer of 2021, the arrival of SADC and Rwandan troops led to a decrease in both the number of violent events as well as the number of fatalities. Over the course of 2022, insurgents were pushed out of large towns – accounting for the high number of fatalities – and their operations were heavily curtailed. The final part of the paper looks at available data on the last 15 months of the insurgency and analyses how a return of violence was made possible by a single-minded focus on military response.

In January 2023, there was an intensification of clashes between insurgents and security forces, predominantly in the Muidumbe district (URL1). February 2023 saw violence drop significantly – in light of what we know of the insurgency, it is not impossible to presume a deliberate strategy behind this. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that according to ACLED, the outreach of insurgents to local communities continued actively in this period (URL2). Having dislodged the insurgents from their major urban centres, the government seemed content to have claimed these victories in a relatively short period. But the history of counter-insurgency measures is filled with cases when major urban centres come under central control, while the countryside is essentially 'surrendered'. The lesson is that they grow in strength, like the Boko Haram in Nigeria or the Taliban in Afghanistan – but these lessons of history were not heeded.

Figure 2.
Political Violence and Reported Deaths in Cabo Delgado between January 2021 and February 2024



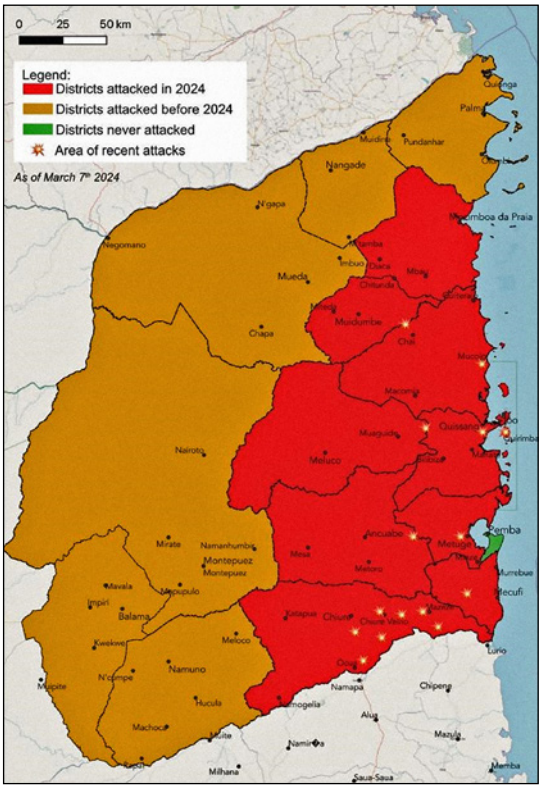
Note. ACLED report (URL11)

Over the course of 2023, the numbers of attacks and fatalities fluctuated at a low level with a slight increase during the summer. In August, the leader of the insurgency, Bonomade Machude Omar was killed, prompting brutal reprisal attacks targeting government soldiers. Additionally, the death of their leader potentially further pushed the insurgents in the direction of a more decentralised, cell-based *modus operandi* (URL3). The autumn and winter of 2023 saw low-level violence, with the proliferation of improvised explosive devices (IED). While the actual violence in these months subsided, the central government did not deal a fatal blow to the violent extremists. Nevertheless, in previous years the insurgents have proved to be 'resilient, adaptable, and capable of rapid expansion' (Heyen-Dubé & Rands, 2022) – one study in 2020 warned that 'with the exception of static leadership, all sustainability areas (…) are improving' (Forster, 2020). Despite warnings that the insurgency has the capacity to resurge, the government did not show the necessary resolve to terminate the insurgency.

At the turn of 2024, the insurgency appeared to have increased the frequency of its attacks as well as started to hit the Eastern parts of Cabo Delgado once more (Opperman, 2024b). The number of incidents in January 2024 was three times as many as in December 2023, with at least 21 civilian casualties, the highest number since December 2022. Additionally, they registered their first capture of a significant settlement (Mucojo) since they were dislodged from other towns by international (Rwandan and SADC) troops. Interestingly, instead

of displacing the population, as they have previously done, they have instituted a strict interpretation of Sharia law, essentially taking the place of the state. After briefly ceding ground to government forces, the insurgents once again took control of Mucojo on 9 February (URL4).

Figure 3.
Map of Attacks Carried Out by Insurgents from January 2024 to March 7, 2024



Note. Independent Consultants, Mozambique

The other significant move taken by the insurgents was a push towards Chiúre, where violence against civilians and the destruction of property was unleashed (URL5). As of 4 March, according to IOM estimates, 112,894 people have been displaced in Cabo Delgado (mostly from and around Chiúre), with 62% of those displaced being children. (OCHA, 2024) This is the second largest displacement since 2017 (UNICEF, 2024). OCHA warned that 850,000 people will suffer from hunger without increased support from outside actors (OCHA, 2023).

Based on the first three months of 2024, the insurgents appear to be pursuing a dual strategy: demonstrating the viability of a Caliphate through positive engagement with select local population (Columbo, 2024), while at other times destroying property and brutally displacing the civilian population. An 'increasing (…) violence against Christians' (Doxsee et al., 2024), as well as the introduction of Sharia law in places occupied by them can potentially suggest the insurgency builds more substantially on its ideological aspects, supported by the ISIS propaganda-machine. Based on these three months, the insurgency will concentrate on reaching into new, previously untouched areas, reorganizing their forces and attempting to forge a stronger alliance with the local communities, essentially shifting to a 'population-based insurgency' (Doxsee et al., 2024), combined with a return to guerrilla warfare.

Since the arrival of international troops in the summer of 2021, the central forces enjoyed overwhelming success on the battlefield. However, they could not translate this success into lasting results as evidenced by events of February and March of 2024. The reasons behind it are situated in the inability of the Mozambican government to demonstrate flexibility and to reformulate its anti-insurgency response – the paper will illustrate this below.

Besides the armed forces from Rwanda and SADC, other states and organizations have provided training missions, aiming to transform the Mozambican state forces into effective fighting and policing units. Understanding the effectiveness of these missions proves challenging, as Maputo was and still is very reluctant to share information with 'foreigners', including partners responsible for training its armed forces. For instance, the EU instructors cannot assess the effectiveness of the troops trained by them once they are deployed (International Crisis Group, 2022). This secrecy – endemic from the very beginning of the insurgency – naturally limits the impact training forces can have on the future of operational capabilities of Mozambican forces.

In terms of non-military efforts, the Northern Integrated Development Agency and the Cabo Delgado Reconstruction Plan were promising features of the counter-insurgency operations. These are governmental programs aiming at the comprehensive development of the region. Nevertheless, while pledges and promises are often substantial, there is no 'concerted, robust, and comprehensive effort' towards reconstruction (URL6). Nothing illustrates the inadequacy of the government's response in terms of development than the fact that the most fundamental necessities, such as shelter, and food are consistently lacking in the region. The UN's Humanitarian Response Plan for Mozambique in 2023 was only 36% funded (Gould, 2023), and for 2024 it has a requirement of over 413 million dollars, yet by the end of March 2024, less than 11% of the funding is

covered (URL7). The UN's World Food Programme (WFP) has warned that it will have to reduce the number of food rations it hands out in the province, due to shrinking resources as food precarity increases (URL8).

The unchanged, single-minded military focus of the government is further evident in the type of help they ask for: calling for lethal equipment, while similarly clear expression in terms of the 'social' component is an omission that speaks volumes. (URL9). Increased international armed support is possible in the near future, with the latest pledge coming from Algeria (URL10). It is unclear, however, whether the increase in the size of the fighting force can be a sustainable solution, especially as the withdrawal of SADC forces looms (Gruzd, 2024).

These features – both the lack of development but also a continued resistance to the transformation of the armed forces – indicate that the Mozambican government still believes that it can address the insurgency in Cabo Delgado through military means. However, military victories are only one part of anti-insurgency operations, providing the necessary physical security to programs that address the structural causes of the insurgency. Another issue that has not seemed to be appreciated by the central government is that at the point of its eruption, the violent extremists had multiple years to 'recruit, indoctrinate, brainwash and transform' its members (Mangena & Pherudi, 2019). According to Emilia Columbo (2020), the work that the jihadist group did before 2017 is a testament to the group's 'solid foundation' laid down during its formative period. The fact that Maputo still expects quick and lasting changes from military campaigns is a testament to a serious misunderstanding of the gravity and complexity of the situation.

Conclusion

This study underscores the critical importance of openness to information and flexibility in addressing the violent insurgency in Cabo Delgado province, Mozambique. While analysing the causes, government responses, and recent developments, it becomes evident that a one-dimensional, militarized approach is inadequate in quelling the insurgency and addressing its underlying drivers.

The first section introduced the conditions prevailing in the Northern province, the catalysts that led to the outbreak of the insurgency and argued that the government did not address the underlying conditions of the insurgency. The second part analysed the predominantly military response of the government in the early years, putting forward the case that the government's heavy-handed response did not achieve its objective. The third part chronicled developments over the course of 2023 and the first three months of 2024, showing that the only side that appears to be actually learning and adopting are the insurgents.

It is important to emphasise the limitations to this study – even research on the ground is hindered by an 'imposed secrecy' (Matsinhe & Valoi, 2019) that is being enacted on the region by the government. Notably, in 2019 journalists and academics were 'arrested and tortured by security forces' (Mutasa & Muchemwa, 2022). Additionally, whilst the situation develops on the ground rapidly, towns and villages can change hands multiple times over a short period of time and as in the case of all military zones, available information is inconsistent and often unreliable. If a suitable approach is to be found to extinguish the insurgency, more precise and detailed information is needed – therefore, transparency is of vital importance to the Mozambican state.

The principal theme presented throughout this paper is about the centrality of free flow of information. The conditions of Cabo Delgado were well-known, the social tensions were well-documented, the heavy-handed response of the military was widely accepted to backfire, corruption and arrogance often served as matches in a tense situation. As the insurgency developed, scholars and international partners have all pointed to the importance of a holistic approach and crucial nature of addressing the causes of the insurgency and not just the result. However, all these warnings and advice fell on deaf ears, either due to inability or unwillingness.

Moving forward, it is imperative for the government to adapt its strategies based on evolving circumstances and feedback from local communities, relevant experts and international partners. This adaptation should entail not only military tactics but also comprehensive socio-economic development initiatives aimed at addressing root causes of discontent.

Moreover, increased international support and collaboration are essential in tackling the insurgency effectively, given its regional security implications and the interconnected nature of modern security threats. Overcoming challenges such as governmental secrecy and restrictions on information flow is crucial to facilitating informed decision-making and crafting effective responses.

The first three months of 2024 showed that the insurgency is far from defeated. If the government of Mozambique continues down a path of close-minded militarism, Cabo Delgado will remain a festering wound in Eastern Africa, radiating extremist violence to the whole region.

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