

Al-Shabab Template Insurgence and the Expansion of the extremist-type Violence's Parameters in northeastern Mozambique

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Abstract

This paper reviews the main features of a new expansion extremist-type violence's parameters in north-eastern Mozambique as a result of violence broke out first in October 2017 in Cabo Delgado province and increasingly became a regional problem; creating risks for oil and gas investors in the region. Although Mozambique has little history of militant activity and police are reluctant to ascribe the attacks to Islamists, some analysts allege the attacks on civilians demonstrate that a group of suspected Islamic militants called Ahlu Sunnah Waj-Jama'a (Adherents to the Sunna and the Community of Muslims Sunni), has raised its terror campaign to a new level. The paper examines the background of Ahlu Sunnah Waj-Jama'a group and argues that it would be naive to allege that Ahlu Sunnah Waj-Jama'a group is the sole actor in that expanding targeting system. The violence and the broadened parameters that went beyond the called objective of Ahlu Sunnah Waj-Jama'a group indicate that there were subterraneous forces at play. Members of Ahlu Sunnah Waj-Jama'a were the pioneer attackers who provided a template pretexts to other forces that want to attack their calculated targets. The paper conclude that simplistic and narrow counter-violence lens ignores the historical context in which religious identities are being shaped and re-shaped in the globe which glosses over the fact that regional, ethnic and religious identities often reinforce each other.

Introduction

In the predominantly Muslim¹ region² of north-eastern Mozambique, close to the Tanzanian border and to one of the world's biggest unexploited offshore gas fields that and Eni SpA, ExxonMobil and Anadarko Petroleum Corp are developing a separate liquefied natural gas projects in Palma near the Tanzanian border, attacks by armed groups have killed at tens of people and displaced more than one thousand since May 2018 in Mocimboa da Praia³, according to Human Rights Watch⁴. Violence first broke out in Mozambique's northern province of Cabo Delgado in October 2017, with local residents reporting gangs armed with machetes attacking police stations, torching villages and executing religious leaders. Residents told Human Rights Watch attackers had burned a mosque and beheaded an Islamic leader in a 05/6/2018 attack where hundreds of homes and dozens of cattle were burned⁵.

In the Mozambique's capital Maputo, police the spokesperson told reporters that during the latest violence, attackers used machetes to kill people and set fire to homes in a village in the district of Macomia between Mocimboa da Praia and Palma. He said the authorities considered the assailants common bandits not terrorists⁶. Although Mozambique has little history of militant activity and police are reluctant to ascribe the attacks to Islamists⁷, but some analysts allege these gruesome attacks on civilians demonstrate that a group of suspected Islamic militants called Ahlu Sunnah Waj-Jama'a (Adherents to the Sunna and the Community of Muslims), has raised its terror campaign to a new level. Some observers are suspicious about the coincidence of the upsurge in attacks and the awarding of a \$750 million contract for protecting gas fields to a private security consortium and some dismiss all this as alarmist sensationalism⁸.

Local people in Cabo Delgado call the group al-Shabab, apparently not because of any connections with the Somali Islamic militant group of that name or any other Islamic militant movement, but because al-Shabab means (the Youth) in

¹ According to Reuters, About 30 % of Mozambique's 30 million people are Roman Catholics and about 18 % are Muslims. See: ENCA Africa, Dozens killed, displaced in Mozambique attacks, Johannesburg, 19/6/2018. <https://www.enca.com/africa/dozens-killed-1000-displaced-in-mozambique-attacks> (Accessed on 26/6/2018)

² Manuel Mucari, UPDATE 1-U.S. embassy warns citizens to consider leaving district in north Mozambique, Reuters, Maputo, 11/6/2018. Available at: <https://af.reuters.com/article/commoditiesNews/idAFL8N1TD4PD> (Accessed on 26/6/2018)

³ Geography contributes to the problem. Mocimboa da Praia, where the attacks started, is 1,800 kilometers (1,118 miles) northeast of Maputo, and Palma, where the offshore gas reserves that Eni, ExxonMobil and Anadarko are developing, is about 80 kilometers north of that. Matthew Hill & Borges Nhamire, Beheadings Signal Threat to Mozambique's \$30 Billion Bonanza, Bloomberg, 7 June 2018. Available at: <https://www.bloombergquint.com/business/2018/06/05/beheadings-signal-threat-to-mozambique-s-30-billion-gas-bonanza> (Accessed on 26/6/2018)

⁴ ENCA Africa, Dozens killed, displaced in Mozambique attacks, Johannesburg, 19/6/2018. Available at: <https://www.enca.com/africa/dozens-killed-1000-displaced-in-mozambique-attacks> (Accessed on 26/6/2018)

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Matthew Hill & Borges Nhamire, Beheadings Signal Threat to Mozambique's \$30 Billion Bonanza, Bloomberg, 7 June 2018. Available at: <https://www.bloombergquint.com/business/2018/06/05/beheadings-signal-threat-to-mozambique-s-30-billion-gas-bonanza> (Accessed on 26/6/2018)

⁷ Manuel Mucari, UPDATE 1-U.S. embassy warns citizens to consider leaving district in north Mozambique, Reuters, Maputo, 11/6/2018. Available at: <https://af.reuters.com/article/commoditiesNews/idAFL8N1TD4PD> (Accessed on 26/6/2018)

⁸ Peter Fabricius, Is another Boko Haram or al-Shabaab erupting in Mozambique? 14/6/2018. Available at: https://issafrica.org/iss-today/is-another-boko-haram-or-al-shabaab-erupting-in-mozambique?utm_source=BenchmarkEmail&utm_campaign=ISS_Weekly&utm_medium=email (Accessed on 26/6/2018)

Arabic, and the group mainly consists of young Muslims from Mocimboa da Praia⁹.

Ahlu Sunnah Waj-Jama'a believed to have formed in the predominantly Muslim northern province of Cabo Delgado around 2014 when its leaders called on followers to adhere to a strict application of Sharia Islamic law¹⁰ and they seek the transformation of Muslim society and the adoption of Islamic education system.

While the violence which first broke out in the province in October 2017 is increasingly becoming a regional problem and creating risks for the oil and gas investors in Cabo Delgado; an area has become a key landing site for heroin shipments that are then trafficked onward to Europe and neighbouring South Africa, according to research by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime¹¹, It would be naive to allege that Ahlu Sunnah Waj-Jama'a group is the sole actor in that expanding targeting system. The violence and the broadened parameters that went beyond the called objective of Ahlu Sunnah Waj-Jama'a group indicate that there were subterranean forces at play.

Mozambique has little history of militant activity and has not been a focal point of Islamic militant activity in the past. Social marginalization, lack of education and lack of formal employment of the youth in the region who are largely from the Mwani ethnic group, though they include young immigrants from other countries such as Tanzania, Somalia and the Great Lakes Region. These people have been radicalized by degrading socio-economic conditions that are so evident in the country's poorest province of Cabo Delgado, as well as a sense of political exclusion, with government security services, reportedly, has responded harshly to the attacks by clamping down indiscriminately and arresting hundreds of people and closing some mosques and Islamic Schools or madrassas¹²

A heavy-handed response and large repression, from government could worsen the situation and create a socio-economic and insecurity situations that might lead the group use other more sophisticated techniques such as bomb attacks that would affect the current efforts to stabilize Mozambique economically and politically if the government unable to fulfill its part of the social contract. Government authorities should take note in particular of the recent United Nations Development Programme report Journey to Extremism in Africa.

A driver of popular support for or acquiescence to similar groups in some parts of Africa, appears to be, is the government's seemingly indiscriminate killing of

⁹ All Africa, Mozambique: Former Policemen Train Islamist Group <http://allafrica.com/stories/201805010190.html> (Accessed on 26/6/2018)

¹⁰ AFP, Mozambique's jihadists terror group: Who are they and what do they want? 14/6/2018. Available at: <http://clubofmozambique.com/news/mozambiques-jihadists-terror-group-who-are-they-and-what-do-they-want/> (Accessed on 26/6/2018)

¹¹ Matthew Hill & Borges Nhamire, Beheadings Signal Threat to Mozambique's \$30 Billion Bonanza, Bloomberg, 7 June 2018. <https://www.bloombergquint.com/business/2018/06/05/beheadings-signal-threat-to-mozambique-s-30-billion-gas-bonanza> (Accessed on 26/6/2018)

¹² Peter Fabricius, Is another Boko Haram or al-Shabaab erupting in Mozambique? 14/6/2018. Available at: https://issafrica.org/iss-today/is-another-boko-haram-or-al-shabaab-erupting-in-mozambique?utm_source=BenchmarkEmail&utm_campaign=ISS_Weekly&utm_medium=email (Accessed on 26/6/2018)

alleged such group members and many others who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time¹³.

Researchers interviewed 718 people, 495 of whom had been directly involved in extremist groups. For 71% of the respondents, the tipping point that prompted them to join extremist groups was violent or repressive government actions against them or others close to them¹⁴. Given the international attention to global terrorism, there is the likelihood that fundamentalist groups receive motivation, ideological support or influence and material from global jihadist movements. Simplistic and narrow counter-violence lens ignores the historical context in which religious identities are being shaped and re-shaped in the globe which glosses over the fact that regional, ethnic and religious identities often reinforce each other. Ahlu Sunnah Waj-Jama'a and similar groups were created under these circumstances, shaped by its Mozambican context and reflecting Mozambique's history of governance deficiencies and poverty in the north region. Unresolved national issues, including the weak economy, weak security state institutions like the police, military and intelligence and intelligence apparatuses were critical factors. Leaders of Ahlu Sunnah Waj-Jama'a call their followers to adhere to a strict application of Sharia Islamic law and they seek the transformation of Muslim society and the adoption of Islamic education system.

Mozambique in common with other countries in Africa faces a unique vulnerability to violent extremism that is shaped by persistent underdevelopment and incomplete peacebuilding and state-building in key regions. There are immense challenges faced by governments: in delivering peace and stability, and in ensuring that the pace and benefits of growth keep up with the expansion of the most youthful population in the world. Narratives of radical upheaval and change, which appeal to the multifaceted sense of grievance that may envelop an individual whose horizons promise no path for advancement, will continue to be attractive as long as underlying circumstances remain unaddressed. Where there is injustice, deprivation and desperation, violent extremist ideologies present themselves as a challenge to the status quo and a form of escape. The message is tailored by recruiters to suit different contexts as well as different types of individuals. Still, low levels of education and a reliance on intermediaries to interpret religion allows largely imported ideologies to serve as a lightning conductor for the frustration and anger that is the inevitable consequence of generations of socio-economic and political marginalization. Grievances against government and state security actors are particularly pronounced among those most vulnerable to recruitment, who also express deep-seated scepticism about the possibility of positive change¹⁵.

¹³ Amnesty International, 2014

¹⁴ UNDP, Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment, 2017, p. 74.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 6.

The Background of Ahlu Sunnah Waj-Jama'a

The birth of Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama as a religious group in the predominantly Muslim province of Cabo Delgado in the far north of Mozambique dates back to 2013 or early 2014, when its leaders called on followers to adhere to a strict application of Sharia Islamic law, but as from 2015 to present date, the group has grown to consist of more than 100 cells, though it is difficult to know how many members it has in total, according to a study by Muslim cleric Sheikh Saide Habibo and Maputo-based academic researchers João Pereira, assistant professor at Eduardo Mondlane University and Salvador Forquilha, director of the Institute of Economic and Social Studies. Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama group mobilizes groups of enthusiastic primarily socially marginalized young people without formal employment or formal education in Cabo Delgado, where poverty runs deep in the rural areas, and most of whom are members of the Mwani ethnic group thought by experts to also be motivated by grievances over perceived political and economic discrimination in favor of Maconde people, the tribal group of President Filipe Nyusi. The group also advocates the application of Sharia Islamic law, refuses to recognise the structures of the Mozambican state. The group attracts young immigrants from other countries such as the neighbouring Tanzania, Somalia and the Great Lakes Region.

They seek the transformation of Muslim society and like Boko Haram in northern Nigeria; the group wants the adoption of Islamic oriented education system rather than the western education¹⁶. The group is probably learning from other militants in Africa and may mimic techniques used by Boko Haram in and al-Shabaab in Somalia¹⁷.

Violence has been urged by factors including economic crisis and governance deficiencies at national and local levels. But it is mainly based on the traditional protest agenda of challenging and undermining the post-colonial secular state. This has been accompanied by pro-Islamic oriented education system fuelled by external influences that included financial support for Wahhabi/Salafi-style preaching.

Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a adherents feel local communities are not practicing correct Islam. They don't send their children to state schools that teaching western oriented education syllabi. They believed that the Islam practised by the orthodox mosques in Mozambique was degenerate, and had deviated from the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed. The group claimed to be restoring the traditional values of Islam. Because they believed Mozambican Islam to be a decadent form of the religion, they would enter mosques wearing shoes and

¹⁶ AFP, Mozambique's jihadists terror group: Who are they and what do they want? 14/6/2018. Available at: <http://clubofmozambique.com/news/mozambiques-jihadists-terror-group-who-are-they-and-what-do-they-want/> (Accessed on 26/6/2018)

¹⁷ Matthew Hill & Borges Nhamire, Beheadings Signal Threat to Mozambique's \$30 Billion Bonanza, Bloomberg, 7 June 2018. Available at: <https://www.bloombergquint.com/business/2018/06/05/beheadings-signal-threat-to-mozambique-s-30-billion-gas-bonanza> (Accessed on 26/6/2018)

carrying knives and similar weapons - an attitude that shocks orthodox Muslims. Eventually, they broke away entirely, and set up their own places of worship. The group has training camps in the Cabo Delgado districts of Mocimboa da Praia, Macomia and Montepuez. In Mocimboa da Praia, where the group staged its first attacks against police installations on 5 October 2017, they are using the back yards of houses owned by their leaders. They have been trained by agents of the Mozambican police who have been expelled from the force, and agents of the frontier guards. Outside the country, they are supposedly trained by militias in the Great Lakes region, and also at Kibiti in Tanzania¹⁸.

The group's leaders have links with 'religious circles, commercial and military activities of radical Islamist groups. The most comprehensive known investigation of Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a so far suggests this is a genuine violent extremist Islamist phenomenon, with some links to foreign jihadists (in Tanzania, Somalia, Kenya and the Great Lakes Region; mostly through training there), though not necessarily directed by them¹⁹.

On 5 October 2017, Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a caught wider attention, when a group of men armed with guns, knives and machetes launched well-coordinated simultaneous attacks targeted police stations in Mocimboa da Praia, 70 km south of the Tanzania border, leaving two police and 14 assailants dead. In response, the authorities detained 133 people, including 32 from Tanzania. The attacks in Cabo Delgado continued at a lower level. But they took a sinister turn on 27 May 2018 when attackers killed 10 unarmed civilians, several of whom were beheaded; and burnt many houses in Monjane village in the district of Macomia²⁰. Since then, there have been 20 attacks by extremist elements in the area in the first four months of the year 2018, according to the Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium. Those figures don't include the May 27 beheadings.

Template Insurgence and the Expansion of the extremist-type Violence's Parameters

The Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a alleged attacks have raged at a lower level since 5 October 2017. The present extremist-type violence has set an expansion of the parameters of the violence burned a mosque and beheaded an Islamic leader. The previous known parameters of the group e.g. attacks against police installations, have significantly changed. The expansion of the parameters of the violence has created a situation whereby one could argue that the violence is not from Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a alone and is the sole actor in this newly

¹⁸ All Africa, Mozambique: Former Policemen Train Islamist Group. Available at: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201805010190.html> (Accessed on 26/6/2018)

¹⁹ Peter Fabricius, Is another Boko Haram or al-Shabaab erupting in Mozambique? 14/6/2018. Available at: https://issafrica.org/iss-today/is-another-boko-haram-or-al-shabaab-erupting-in-mozambique?utm_source=BenchmarkEmail&utm_campaign=ISS_Weekly&utm_medium=email (Accessed on 26/6/2018)

²⁰ Ibid.

expanding broad targeting system. The violence meted out against innocent civilians virtually at random and the recently broadened parameters that go beyond parameters of Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a, indicate that there are subterranean forces at play.

There have been convincing indications of the interplay of extraordinary factors but no serious commitment had been exhibited to investigating these expanding parameters of the conflict. Despite occasional media disclosures of such new dimensions that go beyond conventional analysis, the focus still on Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a alone, thus giving cover to the subterranean forces at play. Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a emerged in its classical form when a group of men armed with guns, knives and machetes launched well-coordinated simultaneous attacks targeted police stations in Mocimboa da Praia in early October 2017, even though its roots are much more complicated than the media publicized crisis moment of the 2017 confrontation with the police forces. When they took up arms their target were mainly police stations, but the expansion witnessed later appeared to have made Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a an easy and trouble-free template. The Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a template is an open instrument that possibly is adopted by other interested players who prefer their armed attacks to appear like and be mistaken for Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a. Such interested players adopting Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a template imitate the operational style, tools and symbolism of the Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a assailants. That way they can be mistaken for Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a and be covered up without specific attention to or investigation of the newly intervening phenomenon. The template covers the interest groups who hope to be mistaken for Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a. The implication is that not all that is reported as Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a attacks are actually Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a activities. But the actual subterranean forces that adopted the Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a template prefer to hide under the cover of the adopted template so they can operate underground, unnoticed, uncontrolled and uninvestigated. The adopted template is what is examined by some analysts and noticed that there might be other actors²¹ using the template to hide their identities.

Some of these players who have been using the Boko Haram template may be argued in very broad terms for the purpose of clear hold of the Violence's direction:

- Members of Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a were the pioneer assailants who provided the template pretexts to other forces that want to attack their calculated targets but would prefer to remain not only underground but unidentified. Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a's physical attack machetes and other weapons were ready instruments for imitation along with slogans sometimes accompanying their operations. Such tools and operational

²¹ Peter Fabricius, Is another Boko Haram or al-Shabaab erupting in Mozambique? 14/6/2018. Available at: https://issafrica.org/iss-today/is-another-boko-haram-or-al-shabaab-erupting-in-mozambique?utm_source=BenchmarkEmail&utm_campaign=ISS_Weekly&utm_medium=email (Accessed on 26/6/2018)

styles were provided by the original authors of Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a attacks to be copied by others as template for replication.

- In many parts of the country, criminals, poor, marginalized populace engaging in ordinary crimes. In the Mozambique's capital Maputo, police the spokesperson told reporters that during the latest violence, attackers used machetes to kill people and set fire to homes in a village in the district of Macomia between Mocimboa da Praia and Palma. He said the authorities considered the assailants common bandits not terrorists
- Mercenaries might deliberately stoking violence to win a lucrative contract to protect the natural gas industry. Some observers are suspicious about the coincidence of the upsurge in attacks and the awarding of a \$750 million contract for protecting gas fields to a private security consortium. The consortium involves Erik Prince, founder of the famous US private security/military company, and a Mozambique company linked to government intelligence.
- The Mozambican National Resistance (Renamo) in disguise. Renamo's late leader Afonso Dhlakama, twice recently returned to the bush, in 2013 and in 2015, to resume low-level civil war. This was because Renamo believed it was being cheated in parliamentary politics. So the party remained ambivalent, with its mainly younger members of Parliament conducting business like a normal political party in the National Assembly, and its older soldiers, not yet demobilised, occasionally attacking vehicles on the main highway to the north.

Straight after being chosen as interim leader, Momade threatened to end the temporary ceasefire with the government and return to warfare. This was if President Filipe Nyusi didn't immediately implement the recent agreement between Nyusi and Dhlakama on decentralisation of power and the integration of Renamo fighters into the regular army.

The agreement would transfer the governorships of the provinces – now all appointed by the ruling party, the Mozambique Liberation Front (Frelimo) central government to whichever party commanded the majority of support in each province. That could have given Renamo three or more governorships.

- Heroin Traffickers. Government officials like the law enforcement agents, intelligence service, customs, anti-trafficking/anti-drug campaigners often become targets of heroin/drug/human/commodity traffickers. Attacks and killings carried by them would be dismissed as Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a. This adequately covers up the real assassin, their sponsors and motives.

According to research by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime; Cabo Delgado area has become a key landing site for

heroin shipments that are then trafficked onward to Europe and neighbouring South Africa²².

These instances of template insurgency are merely prevalent examples. There are certainly other cases of exploitation of the Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama'a attacks to implement individual objectives of persons, interest groups or organizations. It is their expansion of the parameters of the attacks that creates a seemingly such cycle of violence.

Conclusion

Given the international attention to global terrorism, there is the likelihood that fundamentalist groups receive motivation, ideological support or influence and material from global jihadist movements. Simplistic and narrow counter-violence lens ignores the historical context in which religious identities are being shaped and re-shaped in the globe which glosses over the fact that regional, ethnic and religious identities often reinforce each other.

A heavy-handed response and large repression, from government could worsen the situation and create a socio-economic and insecurity situations that might lead the group use other more sophisticated techniques such as bomb attacks that would affect the current efforts to stabilize Mozambique economically and politically if the government unable to fulfil its part of the social contract.

A driver of popular support for or acquiescence to similar groups in some parts of Africa, appears to be, is the government's seemingly indiscriminate killing of alleged such group members and many others who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Mozambique in common with other countries in Africa faces a unique vulnerability to violent extremism that is shaped by persistent underdevelopment and incomplete peacebuilding and state-building in key regions. There are immense challenges faced by governments: in delivering peace and stability, and in ensuring that the pace and benefits of growth keep up with the expansion of the most youthful population in the world.

²² AFP, Mozambique's jihadists terror group: Who are they and what do they want? 14/6/2018. Available at: <http://clubofmozambique.com/news/mozambiques-jihadists-terror-group-who-are-they-and-what-do-they-want/> (Accessed on 26/6/2018)

²² Matthew Hill & Borges Nhamire, Beheadings Signal Threat to Mozambique's \$30 Billion Bonanza, Bloomberg, 7 June 2018. Available at: <https://www.bloombergquint.com/business/2018/06/05/beheadings-signal-threat-to-mozambique-s-30-billion-gas-bonanza> (Accessed on 26/6/2018)