AFRICA

Can Islamic State in Mozambique's Ramadan Resurgence be Repelled?

APRIL 1, 2024

As the Islamic State's (IS) massacre in Moscow revealed, the group can launch unprecedented violence virtually anywhere in the world at a moment when an attack is little expected. Yet, overshadowed by the Moscow attack and other geopolitical events has been the ongoing IS offensive in Mozambique. Although analysts, media, and governments are yet to rededicate attention to IS activities there, the humanitarian crisis and threats to global energy production require a renewed commitment from Mozambique and its partners both regionally and internationally to repel IS's advances in the country.

IS's resurgence was highlighted at the start of Ramadan in March when the IS province in Mozambique released a photoset of its fighters in their base camp in the country's northern jungles. Several dozen heavily armed fighters in camouflaged uniforms were recorded while marching in file and praying and breaking the fast together. Such photos have been typical for IS provinces, but for IS in Mozambique, the photos demonstrated the group's revival after a several-year lull.

In a worst-case, but plausible, scenario, the group could destabilize not only Mozambique but also southern Africa, which is among the only relatively stable regions in Africa today. In addition, instability in Mozambique could upset global energy markets and access. Further, the Mozambique and other African IS provinces' persistence in the aftermath of IS's struggles in its heartland in the Middle East means IS as an idea and multi-pronged organization will remain more impervious to defeat.

IS in Mozambique's Rise and (Temporary) Fall

IS in Mozambique—which is locally referred to as “al-Shabaab (The Youths”) despite no relation to the Somali group of the same name—reached its peak in 2021 when its fighters captured coastal areas of Cabo Delgado province. The fighters then killed and captured dozens of employees of the Total multinational natural gas company, including expatriates, and took control of the company’s facilities. This represented the apex of four years of insurgency that began in 2017 and saw a Mozambican army unprepared to deal with a new form of guerilla warfare.

While the insurgents claimed inspiration from, and maintained ties, especially through media, to IS, they also were adept at hit-and-run attacks, establishing hideouts deep in rural areas for training and recruitment, and using brutality to impose fear in local populations and on Mozambican soldiers themselves. Attacking the energy facility and forcing its multi-year closure was, however, the group’s most monumental—and surprising—attack and revealed the group’s strength, which most analysts previously believed the group could not muster. The group’s demands were, in essence, to establish sharia law in Mozambique.

However, their ability to recruit also benefitted from northern Mozambique’s economic marginalization. Moreover, the group’s operational areas were geographically far from the country’s capital, Maputo. This has meant the Islamic ethnic minority communities there also tend to lack political influence.

Counter-insurgency Support

After the decisive takeover in Cabo Delgado, which catapulted on IS in Mozambique into world attention for the first time, Rwandan President Paul Kagame offered his full-fledged support to Mozambique’s counter-insurgency efforts, including what amounted to 3,000 soldiers. This enabled the Mozambican army to push the jihadists out of most of the territories they held in Cabo Delgado until, it seems, late 2023. In addition, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and African Union (AU) promised to support Mozambique to “find African solutions to African problems”.

However, SADC and AU assistance proved to be more rhetoric than action. Moreover, while Rwanda received special economic deals in Mozambique, if not also reduced Western pressure on Kagame to democratize, in return for support to the Mozambican army, the country’s

attention may dwindle from Mozambique over the long term. Rwanda is already bogged down combatting both IS-loyal jihadists and the militants opposed to Rwanda-backed rebels in its borderlands, which makes an increased and long-lasting commitment to Mozambique questionable.

Another factor that led to IS in Mozambique's quiescence after 2021 was the group's split with its IS-loyal counterparts in Congo, who together comprised the Islamic State in Central African Province (ISCAP). The two groups officially broke apart in the IS system, with the Congolese fighters retaining the ISCAP moniker and the Mozambique-based fighters forming the then-new IS in Mozambique province. The reason for the split was that the Congolese fighters had closer ties to global IS networks and were hoarding funds from, and dominating the communications with, IS, which caused tensions with the Mozambican fighters, who felt marginalized. The rupture between the two groups combined with the ongoing Rwanda-backed counter-insurgency pressure resulted in a downturn in IS in Mozambique attacks but, as evidenced by the IS in Mozambique attacks and media this year, lines of communication with IS have been revived and restored.

Reviving the Jihad in Mozambique

IS in Mozambique re-emerged from a three-year period of near-dormancy with a major attack on Quissanga on March 5, just ahead of Ramadan, in which 500 fighters captured a military base defended by only 40 soldiers. So entrenched were the jihadists that they had scouts in the local towns to identify and target soldiers who attempted to strip off their uniforms and blend into the populations. The size of the jihadists' brigades, especially after days earlier Mozambican president Filipe Nyusi stated that the jihadists could only attack in cells of three to four fighters, has demoralized Mozambican soldiers and upended the government narrative about the insurgency's imminent end.

Further evidence that this was not a one-off attack in Quissanga was the subsequent attack only two days later on a nearby village in which 70 children were reportedly abducted and multiple churches were burned down. Other similar attacks on churches in northern Mozambique have followed since then and occurred in February. If the humanitarian situation had somewhat improved since the 2021 takeover in Cabo Delgado, the latest attacks have

reaccelerated the emergency, with more than 100,000 civilians newly displaced in northern Mozambique. Combined with the previously displaced civilians from the earlier phase of the conflict, this means there are now an estimated one million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country.

Any Path Forward?

The UN estimates that $415 million will be needed to address Mozambique's humanitarian crisis. However, with international attention focused on Ukraine, Gaza, and elsewhere in Africa itself, this aid may not be forthcoming. If insufficient aid is provided to Mozambique— which is already impoverished and may struggle to revive its economy due to delays in reopening the revenue-making natural gas facilities as a result of the renewed jihadist attacks— it will only create a larger pool for IS in Mozambique's recruitment from disaffected and alienated populations. As a result, it is essential that regional and international bodies provide the financial support that Mozambique needs to care for the IDPs in the country, less they, too, turn against the state or becoming recruiting targets. Even though U.S. priorities for the interim future are likely to be related to the Russia-Ukraine, Israel-Palestine, and China-Taiwan conflicts, the U.S. Bureau of African Affairs could help coordinate the international humanitarian response.

The SADC also is planning to withdraw its 1,900 soldiers in Mozambique. At this time, Mozambique's demoralized soldiers, who themselves complain of insufficient equipment and rations, are not capable of compensating for their withdrawal. The EU is expected to train 1,600 Mozambique soldiers by September 2024, which will be essential for the Mozambique army—albeit not necessarily sufficient—to turn the tide against IS in Mozambique. It will be imperative for the EU, if not also other militaries in the region and further abroad, to live up to their commitments in training and supporting the Mozambican army to be able to stem the tide of IS's advance in Mozambique. The U.S, for its part, could potentially increase its current "annual military exercises" with the Mozambican army from one to two per year.

Lastly, besides military and humanitarian solutions, Mozambique could benefit from exploring locally mediated solutions between, for example, village leaders and the jihadists. This would not necessarily grant legitimacy to the jihadists, but could provide a short-term reprieve to

civilians, reduce their displacement, and allow the government to concentrate on providing aid to hundreds of thousands of already displaced people. Most conflicts require some form of negotiation to wane or end, and although as long as the jihadists remain loyal to IS negotiations will seem futile, some form of dialogue could pay off in the long run. Indeed, military pressure combined local mediation and support to IDPs to recover their livelihoods is among the paths out of this war for Mozambique. The local nature of such initiatives will, however, require the willpower primarily of the Mozambican government itself.
