



**After Palma:
Assessing the Islamic State's Position
in Northern Mozambique**

Austin Doctor II August 2022

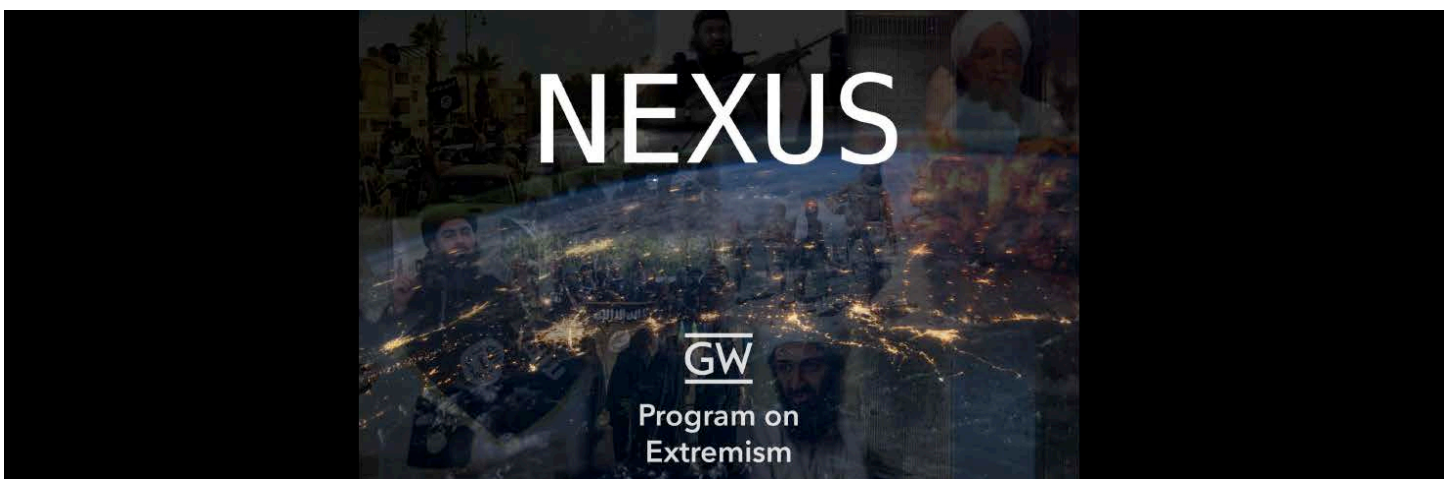
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About The Program on Extremism and *Nexus*

The Program on Extremism at George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and non-violent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public.

This report is released as part of The Global-Local Jihadist Nexus project (***Nexus***). ***Nexus*** draws on a global network of subject matter experts and locally-based researchers to monitor Islamic State and al-Qaida affiliates across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, as well as their support and enabling networks in the West. Our products analyze the interplay of several pairs of forces that have the potential to drive or constrain the global Islamic State and Al-Qaida nexus, including: global and local contexts, ideological and pragmatic drivers, individual and group appeals, leader-inspired and organizationally-enabled change, foreign influence versus local interest, and more.

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Executive Summary

- ❖ ISIS-Mozambique is well positioned to execute a focused, violent, and disruptive guerrilla campaign in a bid to outlast the current coalition of Mozambican and regional forces. Government forces and local civilians should be prepared for an uptick in the group's operational tempo.
- ❖ Still, despite the group's recent promotion to *wilayat*, ISIS-Mozambique faces substantial constraints in the form of heightened counterinsurgency pressure and targeted operations against its regional support network. In the near term, the group will struggle to capture and hold territory on a pre-2022 level.
- ❖ The core propellant of the insurgency in northern Mozambique remains local horizontal inequalities associated with the exploitation of resource wealth in the region and continued governmental abuse and neglect.
- ❖ The jihadist global-local nexus offers needed insight into the nature and scope of the threat presented by the group today and in the near future. The group will communicate and coordinate with the Islamic State's leadership, but its centers of gravity are deeply local. The majority of the group's engagement with the ISIS transnational network will occur directly with other affiliates on the African continent.

Image 1: A 2019 propaganda video released by the Islamic State showcases fighters in Mozambique pledging allegiance to the former caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.



Introduction

In March 2021, Ansar al-Sunna Wa Jamma (“ASWJ” or “ISIS-M”) – a militant group associated with the Islamic State – attacked the coastal city of Palma in northern Mozambique. The operation garnered greater credibility for ISIS-M both regionally and within the global jihadist enterprise. The assault also provoked a bolstered military response to the crisis. As a result, less than five months after Palma, the group was ousted from its base in Mocimboa da Praia and faced a string of additional battlefield losses. Yet, while the character of the conflict has changed, it shows no signs of ending soon. Now more than one year after the attack at Palma, this report provides an updated assessment of the trajectory of the ISIS-M insurgency, with special attention to shifts in the group’s operational profile and connection to the Islamic State’s central leadership.

Ansar al-Sunna Wa Jamma first garnered significant international attention in October 2017, when militant fighters attacked and occupied the Mozambican town of Mocimboa da Praia for nearly two days. Between October 2017 and March 2021, the group was involved in over 1,000 violent events – including armed battles and attacks on civilian targets – which produced at least 3,000 recorded fatalities.¹ During this time, the group demonstrated a marked improvement in the sophistication of its military operations. In 2017, most assaults were largely uncoordinated and were conducted with low-quality small arms, even machetes. In early 2020, the group showed a new ability to mount simultaneous operations in different geographic areas on security and state targets.² By early 2021, the militants were gathering pre-attack intelligence and executing complex operations with observed coordination across maritime and land-based forces.³ The first-order effects of the insurgency during this period were severe. By the end of this period, an estimated 1.3 million people were estimated to be in need of assistance and more than 900,000 faced crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity.⁴

¹ “ACLED Dashboard.” ACLED, May 20, 2022. <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard>.

² International Crisis Group. “Stemming the Insurrection in Mozambique’s Cabo Delgado.” Crisis Group. Crisis Group 2022, June 11, 2021. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/southern-africa/mozambique/303-stemming-insurrection-mozambiques-cabo-delgado>.

³ Lycan, Tyler, Christopher Faulkner, and Austin C. Doctor. “Making Waves: Militant Maritime Operations along Africa’s Eastern Coast.” *War on the Rocks*. Texas National Security Review, November 4, 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/11/making-waves-militant-maritime-operations-along-africas-eastern-coast/>.

⁴ UN News. “Mozambique: Thousands Continue to Flee Violence in Cabo Delgado | | UN News.” United Nations. United Nations, March 22, 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1114412>; Shurkin, Michael. “Understanding the Meteoric Rise of the Islamic State in Mozambique.” *New Lines Institute*, June 22, 2021.

<https://newlinesinstitute.org/terrorism/understanding-the-meteoric-rise-of-the-islamic-state-in-mozambique/>.

The insurgency's season of rapid growth culminated in a March 2021 multi-day assault on the coastal town of Palma located in the northern province of Cabo Delgado.⁵ During the operation — involving hundreds of fighters, multiple points of simultaneous attack, and maritime support — the militant group targeted a number of strategic sites, including an airfield, a military barracks, the town's banks, and a food warehouse.⁶ ASWJ claimed to have killed 55 persons in the attack – emphasizing the Christians and government troops among the fatalities. Upon their exit, they left behind many more injured and displaced.⁷

The Islamic State's central leadership quickly claimed the assault on Palma. Only two weeks before, the US State Department had designated ASWJ (monikered "ISIS-Mozambique" or "ISIS-M") as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and issued separate designations for the group's top leadership.⁸ Indeed, the insurgency in Mozambique had been officially incorporated into the Islamic State's Central Africa Province (ISCAP) nearly two years prior.⁹ Moreover, in a May 2022 statement, the Islamic State described ASWJ as representing not just a "wing" of ISCAP, but its own *wilayat*, underscoring the value of this node in its global network. Still, important questions remain about the character of the Islamic State's relationship with the ASWJ insurgents and the future trajectory of the conflict.

⁵ Weiss, Caleb. "Islamic State Claims Capture of Coastal City in Mozambique." FDD's Long War Journal. Public Multimedia Inc., March 30, 2021. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2021/03/islamic-state-claims-capture-of-coastal-city-in-mozambique.php>.

⁶ ACLED, Zitamar News, and Media Fax. "Cabo Ligado Weekly: 29 March-4 April 2021." Cabo Ligado, April 8, 2021. <https://www.cabolidado.com/reports/cabo-ligado-weekly-29-march-4-april-2021>.

⁷ ACLED, Zitamar News, and Media Fax. "The Islamic State, the Cabo Delgado Insurgency, and the Palma Attack." Cabo Ligado, April 19, 2021. <https://www.cabolidado.com/monthly-reports/cabo-ligado-monthly-march-2021#:~:text=Following%20the%2024%20March%20insurgent,Mozambican%20troops%20and%20other%20Christians>.

⁸ Goldbaum, Christina. "Isis Claims Responsibility for Mozambique Attack." The New York Times. The New York Times, March 30, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/30/world/africa/isis-mozambique-attack.html>; Office of the Spokesperson. "State Department Terrorist Designations of Isis Affiliates and Leaders in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique - United States Department of State." U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State, March 10, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/state-department-terrorist-designations-of-isis-affiliates-and-leaders-in-the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-and-mozambique/>.

⁹ Lister, Tim. "The March 2021 Palma Attack and the Evolving Jihadi Terror Threat to Mozambique." Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 2021. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-march-2021-palma-attack-and-the-evolving-jihadi-terror-threat-to-mozambique/>.

Relevance to Policy and Practice

The Battle at Palma has proved an inflection point in the insurgency. Combined with the subsequent temporary closure of the French *Total* \$20 billion natural gas project in the region, the assault galvanized regional and international willpower to disrupt ISIS-M's territorial expansion and degrade its operational capacity.¹⁰ Following a multi-year spree of success and organizational expansion, the militants began to face significant setbacks in 2021, including the loss its territorial base in August. Still, the group continues to present a persistent and lethal threat to local security and global initiatives in the region. The conflict shows no sign of ending soon.

From October 2017 through the March 2021, the Mozambique government largely relied on a haphazard force of police and security personnel, augmented with foreign-sourced combat support, to degrade ISIS-M. In 2019, Mozambique solicited the support of the Wagner Group, a Kremlin-linked private military company. The Russian mercenaries withdrew after facing significant losses.¹¹ In 2020 Mozambique contracted the Dyck Advisory Group (DAG), a private military company based on South Africa. DAG's contract ended in April 2021, following a string of accusations of human rights violations perpetrated by group members and their demonstrated failure to match the insurgents in combat.¹²

Since April 2021, thousands of military personnel – both from neighboring countries and states outside of Africa. – have deployed to the Cabo Delgado province. After some internal gridlock, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) initiated its mission in Mozambique (SAMIM), with a first round of troops deployed in July.¹³ The SAMIM effort comprises forces from eight regional countries, whose forces fight alongside the Mozambican armed forces and a separate contingent of troops from Rwanda. The Rwanda Defense Force has concentrated its activities to the north, and had some early notable success in disrupting ASWJ's operations in key areas. The Rwandan troops, for instance, played a significant role in liberating Mocimboa da Praia from ASWJ occupation in August 2021.¹⁴

¹⁰ Estelle, Emily. "The Islamic State Resurges in Mozambique." *Foreign Policy*. Foreign Policy, June 16, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/16/mozambique-islamic-state-terrorism-france-total/>.

¹¹ Fabricius, Peter. "Russian Mercenaries: Wagner Private Military Force Licks Wounds in Northern Mozambique." *Daily Maverick*, November 28, 2019. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-11-29-wagner-private-military-force-licks-wounds-in-northern-mozambique/>; Plichta, Marcel. "Russia's Mercenaries Don't Want to Control Africa. They Want to Loot It." *Defense One*. Defense One, March 22, 2022.

¹² International Crisis Group. "Stemming the Insurrection in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado."

¹³ Demuynck, Méryl, and Gijs Weijenberg. "The Upcoming SADC Intervention: A New Way Ahead to Combat Terrorism in Mozambique?" (2021).

¹⁴ Reuters. "EU Starts Mission to Train Mozambique Troops to Fight Insurgency." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, November 3, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/eu-starts-mission-train-mozambique-troops-fight-insurgency-2021-11-03/#:~:text=The%20EU's%20mission%20will%20see,%2C%20Sanchez%20Benedito%20Gaspar%20said.>



Image 2: Map of local and regional troop deployments (Source: Institute for Security Studies)

The joint offensive by government troops with Rwandan and SAMIM has recovered several districts from insurgent control, though their displacement prompted a new surge of attacks in neighboring districts.¹⁵ SADC recently extended its mission, which was set to expire in April 2022, though reports suggest deep divisions within Mozambique over the Rwandan and SADC deployments. Overall, despite its notable successes, the tripartite counterinsurgency force continues to comprise an uneasy and relatively uncoordinated campaign.¹⁶

Other elements of the international community have responded with military and development assistance as well. In spring 2021, approximately a dozen US Army Green Berets arrived in Mozambique to help train government armed forces.¹⁷ Around the same time, the European Union initiated a two-year mission to form and train a “quick reaction force” to be deployed in the Cabo

¹⁵ Henriques, Bárbara. “Increased Violence Prevents UN from Accessing People in Need.” 360 Mozambique, May 5, 2022. https://360mozambique.com/development/increased-violence-prevents-un-from-accessing-people-in-need/?utm_source=mailpoet&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=360%2BMay.

¹⁶ Louw-Vaudran, “SADC and Rwanda Shouldn’t Go It Alone in Mozambique.”

¹⁷ Cruz, José de Arimatéia da. “Fueling Insurgency: Liquefied Natural Gas, ISIS, and Green Berets in Mozambique.” Modern War Institute, March 18, 2022. <https://mwi.usma.edu/fueling-insurgency-liquefied-natural-gas-isis-and-green-berets-in-mozambique>; Walsh, Declan, and Eric Schmitt. “American Soldiers Help Mozambique Battle an Expanding ISIS Affiliate.” The New York Times. The New York Times, March 15, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/15/world/africa/mozambique-american-troops-isis-insurgency.html>.

Delgado region.¹⁸ Reportedly, the EU may also allocate additional millions to prop up Rwanda's defense force in Mozambique with non-lethal equipment, including deployable tents, vehicles, generators, and air transportation.¹⁹ In April 2022, Japan signed an agreement to donate border control and monitoring equipment worth about \$4.6 million to Mozambique that will mainly be used to enhance security in the northern provinces.²⁰

Lastly, it was announced in May 2022 that the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS will pivot to Africa as a priority region.²¹ Doug Hoyt, the acting U.S. deputy special envoy to the Coalition, clarified the nature of this support: "It's not going to be military hardware, tanks... We are talking about civilian-led capacity building. That's border security. That's collection of biometric evidence. That's information sharing. That's a focus on the judicial processes."²² It is unclear at this time whether Mozambique, which is not currently a member of coalition, is to be included in this campaign.²³ In the meantime, ISIS-M remains of the Islamic State's most active affiliates in the region.

While regional and international involvement has coincided with notable gains against ISIS-M, the ongoing pivots in ISIS-M operations and the group's position with respect to local, regional, and global dynamics warrant continued attention. Time remains on the side of the insurgents.

¹⁸ Reuters. "EU Starts Mission to Train Mozambique Troops to Fight Insurgency." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, November 3, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/eu-starts-mission-train-mozambique-troops-fight-insurgency-2021-11-03/#:~:text=The%20EU's%20mission%20will%20see,%2C%20Sanchez%2DBenedito%20Gaspar%20said>.

¹⁹ Hill, Matthew, and Borges Nhamirre. "EU Weighs Funding Rwanda's Fight Against Mozambique Insurgents." Bloomberg.com. Bloomberg, January 28, 2022. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-28/eu-weighs-funding-rwanda-s-fight-against-mozambique-insurgents>; Nielsen, Nikolaj. "Eu Mulls Shoring up Rwanda Armed Forces in Mozambique." EUobserver, May 10, 2022. <https://euobserver.com/world/154897>.

²⁰ Hill, Matthew. "Gas Bonanza in Limbo as Mozambique Insurgency Simmers." Bloomberg.com. Bloomberg, April 2, 2022. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-03/mozambique-gas-bonanza-in-limbo-as-islamist-insurgency-simmers>.

²¹ Office of the Spokesperson. "Joint Communiqué by Ministers of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS - United States Department of State." U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State, May 11, 2022. <https://www.state.gov/joint-communicue-by-ministers-of-the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis-2/>.

²² Seldin, Jeff. "Global Coalition Warns No Rest for Fight against Islamic State." VOA. Global Coalition Warns No Rest for Fight Against Islamic State, May 11, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/global-coalition-warns-no-rest-for-fight-against-islamic-state-/6568029.html>.

²³ United States Department of State. "Members – the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS - United States Department of State." U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State, February 28, 2022. <https://www.state.gov/the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis-partners/>.

Key Considerations

Three overarching factors in the year following the March 2021 Battle at Palma – ISIS-Mozambique’s shifting operational profile, the group’s local foundations, and its connections with the Islamic State’s global enterprise – carry important implications for efforts to counter the insurgency in northern Mozambique and prevent further contagion of jihadist violent extremism in the region. Each of these areas are expanded upon below.

Operational Pivot Following the Battle at Palma

In response to changes in the strategic environment, ISIS-M has shifted key elements of its operational profile. Facing a bolstered resistance in the aftermath of Palma, ISIS-M suffered a series of notable setbacks. Now a year later, the group has largely been displaced from its prior territorial strongholds and urban hubs near the coast. In the year following the Battle at Palma, its level of violent activity ebbed and its operational tempo became more sporadic. According to the Cabo Ligado Initiative, ISIS-M has been involved in at least 332 violent events since April 2021, with 230 of those occurring before the end of the year and roughly one-third of those taking place between January and April 2022.²⁴ The uptick in group activity over the summer, however, demonstrates the group’s resilience and continued capacity for violence.

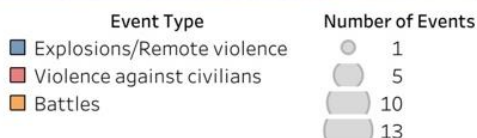
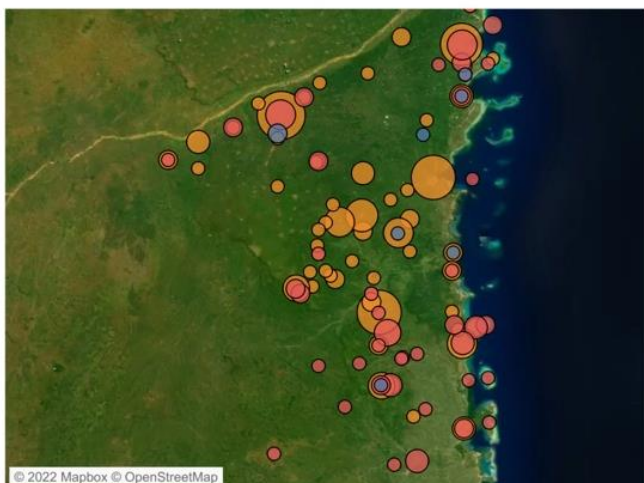
Operationally, ISIS-M has decentralized its operations further by regrouping its fighters into smaller, more autonomous, and geographically dispersed units. Moreover, the group has generally been more concentrated inland with fewer attacks in 2022 on littoral cities and spaces relative to the previous year. There have been, of course, exceptions to this trend. For instance, insurgents attacked the coastal village of Olumbe on 6 May.²⁵ Reportedly, Rwandan and Mozambican forces responded and allegedly killed as many as 20 insurgents. A day later, militant fighters reportedly killed three Mozambican soldiers in an attack on a military barracks in Quiterajo, approximately 120 km south of Olumbe. Some reports indicate about 40 to 50 insurgents were involved in the attack.²⁶ These attacks and, more recently, others like them suggest that littoral urban spaces still remain well within ISIS-M’s operational range.

²⁴ ACLED, Zitamar News, and MediaFax. Cabo Ligado, 2022. <https://www.caboligado.com/>.

²⁵ Hamming, Tore Refslund. “Yesterday the Islamic State Claimed an Attack in Mozambique but This Time It Presented Mozambique as a Separate Province (Wilayat Mozambique) Contrasting the Usual Central Africa Province. per Data from @Ex_Trac This Comes after a Month & a Half without Any Attacks in the Country.” Twitter. Twitter, May 10, 2022. <https://twitter.com/ToreRHamming/status/1523916989995143168?s=20&t=mYQvnC4NMsBaeyQZAGn8Ag>.

²⁶ Opperman, Jasmine. “Reports Indicate about 40 to 50 Insurgents Were Involved in the Attack.” Twitter. May 11, 2022. <https://twitter.com/Jasminechic00/status/1524296263805673476?s=20&t=9GoqftkZmdEfAGadmISN6g>.

Events By Location



Events By Location

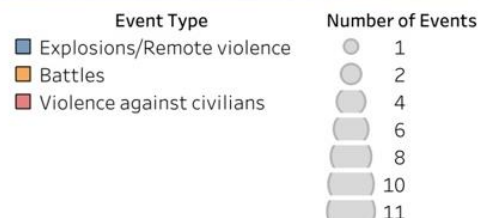
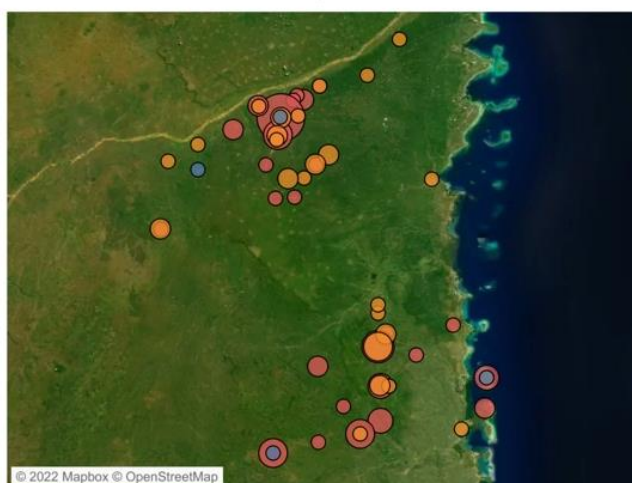


Image 3: Distribution of ISIS-M violent events since the Battle at Palma (Source: Cabo Ligado)

Tactically, the group has mostly relied on ambushes by small-to-moderate sized combat units on both hard and soft targets. There are some signs of tactical innovation, which may have been spurred by recent losses. For example, evidence suggests that some group members are using small drones to surveil potential targets and the movements of counterinsurgent forces. According to a recent report, in March 2022 government forces intercepted and neutralized three ISIS-Mozambique “drone squads.”²⁷ At this time, there are no public reports that the group is using drones to conduct airborne attacks though the use of armed commercial off-the-shelf drones would match TTPs from the Islamic State’s toolkit.²⁸ An increase in suicide bomb attacks or other improvised explosive device methods would likely provide further evidence of intra-network tactical diffusion in Mozambique.

The group’s ranks seem also, if temporarily, to have thinned during this period. ISIS-M was recently estimated to have 200 to 400 active fighters.²⁹ Its membership comprises adult combatants, child

²⁷ Club of Mozambique. “Mozambique Army Intercepts ISIS Drones Using Israeli MCTECH Systems - Israel Defense Report.” Mozambique. MozParks, March 7, 2022. <https://clubofmozambique.com/news/mozambique-army-intercepts-isis-drones-using-israeli-mctech-systems-israel-defense-report-211002/>.

²⁸ Doctor, Austin C., and James Igoe Walsh. “The Militant Drone Playbook.” War on the Rocks. Texas National Security Review, August 12, 2021. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/the-militant-drone-playbook/>.

²⁹ United Nations Security Council. “Letter dated 11 July 2022 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council”

soldiers, and some foreign terrorist fighters from nearby regional states, including Tanzania, South Africa, Uganda, Kenya, and others.³⁰ If accurate, this number reflects a marked decrease from the estimated 2,000 fighters believed to be in the rank-and-file as recently as March 2021.³¹ This may reflect an increase in fatalities suffered on the battlefield and/or voluntary attrition in the face of losses over the past year. Despite this, the group remains well positioned to undermine stability in the region and to threaten global interests.

It is worth noting that there have been no clear attempts by ISIS-M to capture and hold territory since it lost Mocimboa da Praia in August 2021. This is marked divergence from group's observed strategic approach in the pre-Palma period. This year, disruption and attrition through guerilla-style attacks have been the group's key operational principles, rather than degradation and destruction through pitched battles against government forces. That said, the group's constellation of combat units across the north are well capable of being lethal in its areas of operation, even in spaces where counterinsurgent forces are present. In the Nangade area near the Tanzania border, for example, locals recently reported that SAMIM forces have been largely ineffective in mitigating the militant threat in the district.³² While not seeking to hold and govern these spaces, the group will likely seek to conduct lethal, isolated attacks in urban areas.

At least 1,700 civilians have been killed by the group since October 2017, according to the ACLED data project, with dozens of attacks against civilians taking place in 2022 thus far. ISIS-M also continues to engage in severe levels of non-lethal forms of anti-civilian violence, to include kidnapping and sexual violence.³³ In late April 2022, for example, ISIS-Mozambique perpetrated a slew of attacks and kidnappings across several districts in the northern region.³⁴ Multiple non-profit human rights groups report that ISIS-Mozambique continues to abduct child soldiers, some as young as 12 years old – at least 50 in the past twelve months alone.³⁵ Human Rights Watch reports that the militants have

United Nations Security Council. United Nations, July 15, 2022.
<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S%202022%20547.pdf>

³⁰ Columbo, Emilia, and Austin C. Doctor. "Foreign Fighters and the Trajectory of Violence in Northern Mozambique." *War on the Rocks*. Texas National Security Review, April 13, 2021. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/foreign-fighters-and-the-trajectory-of-violence-in-northern-mozambique/>.

³¹ Mwakideu, Chrispin. "Mozambique's Extremist Violence Poses Threat for Neighbors." *DW.COM*. DW, March 29, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/mozambiques-extremist-violence-poses-threat-for-neighbors/a-57043563?maca=en-Twitter-sharing>.

³² ACLED, Zitamar News, and MediaFax. "Cabo Ligado Weekly: 25 April-8 May 2022." *Cabo Ligado*. Cabo Ligado, May 17, 2022. <https://www.caboligado.com/reports/cabo-ligado-weekly-25-apri-8-may-2022>.

³³ Amnesty International. "What I Saw is Death': War Crimes in Mozambique's Forgotten Cape." *Amnesty International Ltd Peter Benenson House* (2021).

³⁴ ACLED, Zitamar News, and MediaFax. "Cabo Ligado Weekly: 25 April-8 May 2022."

³⁵ Miguel, Ramos. "Cabo Delgado: UNICEF Preocupado Com O Aumento De Crianças Raptadas Por Terroristas." *VOA*. Cabo Delgado: UNICEF preocupado com o aumento de crianças raptadas por terroristas, May 6, 2022. <https://www.voaportugues.com/a/cabo-delgado-unicef-preocupado-com-o-aumento-de-crian%C3%A7as-raptadas-por-terroristas/6560860.html>.

“enslaved and sexually abused” hundreds of women and girls.³⁶ In the first few months of 2022 alone, an estimated 6,000 people were registered as newly displaced following the resurgence of conflict in Cabo Delgado and Niassa provinces.³⁷ The group will likely remain highly abusive of civilian communities, especially those perceived to be non-compliant or members of social out-groups.

Understanding the nature of ISIS-M’s operational shift offers critical insight:

- ❖ At the moment, the violent extremist organization shows little intention to capture and hold territory, but maintains a strong capacity for lethal action against both military and civilian targets via smaller scale, guerrilla style attacks. This, combined with the geographic dispersion of the group’s combat units, will make an expeditious resolution to the insurgency unlikely.
- ❖ ISIS-M will likely leverage its operations – including brutal attacks against civilians – for propaganda purposes, to disparage the regional counterinsurgency coalition, to attract recruits and material support through ISIS networks, and to coerce the support of the local population.

Regional Reach, Local Footholds

While connected to the Islamic State’s central leadership, the group’s surest footholds are local. Like many radical Islamist groups in Africa, ISIS-M is first and foremost a local insurgent group.³⁸ Key permitting factors for the violent crisis in northern Mozambique remain local horizontal inequalities associated with the exploitation of resource wealth in the region and continued governmental abuse and neglect.

Relatedly, the composition of the group’s leadership suggests that regional credibility and local operational experience remain important factors in leadership selection – a bottom-up, rather than top-down process.³⁹ The persistent disruption to the Islamic State’s central leadership only makes it more

³⁶ DW. “Mozambique Jihadis Kidnap 600 Women, Girls since 2018.” DW.COM, July 12, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/mozambique-jihadis-kidnap-600-women-girls-since-2018-report/a-60041923>.

³⁷ Henriques, Bárbara. “Increased Violence Prevents UN from Accessing People in Need.” 360 Mozambique, May 5, 2022. https://360mozambique.com/development/increased-violence-prevents-un-from-accessing-people-in-need/?utm_source=mailpoet&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=360%2BMay; Columbo, Emilia. “Centering Civilian Protection in Northern Mozambique.” Centering Civilian Protection in Northern Mozambique | Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 21, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/centering-civilian-protection-northern-mozambique>; UNHCR. “Cabo Delgado Situation - UNHCR.” UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency. United Nations, June 11, 2021. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Mozambique%20IDP%20Response%20update%202-15%20April%202021.pdf>.

³⁸ Matfess, Hilary. “In Africa, All Jihad Is Local.” Foreign Policy, May 16, 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/16/in-africa-all-jihad-is-local/>.

³⁹ West, Sunguta. “Leaders of Mozambican Militant Group Revealed.” Jamestown, October 4, 2018. <https://jamestown.org/brief/leaders-of-mozambican-militant-group-revealed/>; Office of the Spokesperson. “State Department Terrorist Designations of Isis Affiliates and Leaders in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique - United States Department of State.”

likely that command and control will continue to be driven by local considerations and directed by local leaders.⁴⁰

The extent to which the group's Islamist ideology shaped its political objectives has morphed over time. Writing on the group's formation and early years, Eric Morier-Genoud argues that the group "did not simply follow Islamic religious principles but wanted to establish a sharia-based political order.... It was an Islamist sect until 2017, when it decided to stop withdrawing from society and went on the attack in order to change society."⁴¹ This mirrors a relationship and sequence of events common to jihad in other parts of Africa — a force-multiplying framework superimposed on a set of extant grievances and socio-political circumstances otherwise unrelated to the transnational jihadist enterprise. In August 2022, group members released a video in which they committed to continued violence until "the implementation of sharia in Mozambique" was accomplished.

Thus, ISIS-M is best described as "a local insurgency with a regional character."⁴² Indeed, the group has long-standing roots in the regional militant community — including with the Allied Democratic Forces (ISIS-DRC) — and continues to draw on these to its advantage. Its motivating grievances, permitting factors, recruitment pools, and leadership are deeply intertwined with communities and circumstances on the ground. Put differently, ISIS-M's centers of gravity — its core sources of strength — remain its access to communities living in northern areas and to the Tanzania border. The group remains sufficiently managed, financed, and staffed to maintain a disruptive campaign in these critical areas.

Understanding the nature of ISIS-M's local foundations offers critical insight:

- ❖ Unresolved, multigenerational grievances and socio-political circumstances facilitate the continued existence and potential growth of ISIS-M.
- ❖ Efforts to curb ISIS-M's expansion and minimize group violence against civilians and critical infrastructure will likewise need to start from the inside-out, targeting the sources of these grievances and beginning with the protection of local communities and displaced persons.
- ❖ ISIS-M's connections to regional militant networks in central and southern Africa remains a viable source of sustainability and growth for the insurgency.

⁴⁰ International Crisis Group. "A Death in Idlib: The Killing of the Top ISIS Leader and Its Impact." Crisis Group. Crisis Group 2022, February 4, 2022. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/syria/death-idlib-killing-top-isis-leader-and-its-impact>.

⁴¹ Morier-Genoud, Eric. "The jihadi insurgency in Mozambique: origins, nature and beginning." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 14, no. 3 (2020): 396-412. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2020.1789271>.

⁴² Warner, Jason. *The Islamic State in Africa: The Emergence, Evolution, and Future of the Next Jihadist Battlefield*. Oxford University Press, 2022.

The Jihadist Global Connection in Mozambique

While ISIS-M's local foundations are of critical importance, the group's connection to the global jihadist enterprise should not be relegated to window dressing. To the contrary, it is a strategic arrangement of mutual benefit to the Islamic State's central leadership and ISIS-M. This association carries a multi-tiered effect. ISIS-M's position to the ISIS global network, for instance, has strengthened its intra-regional connections as well. US AFRICOM Commander Gen. Stephen Townsend recently expressed concern over the "increased collaboration among ISIS groups in central Africa...expanding the terrorist threat to Mozambique, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo."⁴³

Speculation about the group's connections with the Islamic State's global enterprise started as early as 2018, when a photo of six group members pledging allegiance to ISIS-Central was shared on multiple social media and internet platforms.⁴⁴ But mid-2019 marked the beginning of an emboldened, more overtly co-branded venture when ISIS-Central designating the group as a "wing" within its Central African Province (ISCAP).⁴⁵ Of course, some have suggested that the ISIS connection to ASWJ is greatly exaggerated.⁴⁶ A UN Security Council report argued that "there is no clear evidence of command and control over ASWJ by [ISIS-Central]." Yet there is little room to doubt that the formal association exists and that communication between these organizations occurs. The question, as is true with many ISIS affiliates in the region, is one of form and degree.⁴⁷

⁴³ Townsend, Stephen J. "Statement of General Stephen J. Townsend, United States Army Commander United States Africa Command Before the Senate Armed Services Committee." *testimony before the Armed Services Committee, US Senate* (2020).

⁴⁴ Mugeci Githing'u, Brenda, and Tore Refslund Hamming. "The Arc of Jihad: The Ecosystem of Militancy in East, Central and Southern Africa." International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation. King's College London, 2021. <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/ICSR-Report-The-Arc-of-Jihad-The-Ecosystem-of-Militancy-in-East-Central-and-Southern-Africa.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Candland, Tara, Adam Finck, Haroro J. Ingram, Laren Poole, Lorenzo Vidino, and Caleb Weiss. "The Islamic State in Congo." *George Washington University*. 2021.

⁴⁶ BBC News. "Mozambique Palma Attack: Why Is Involvement Is Exaggerated." BBC News. BBC, April 17, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56773012>.

⁴⁷ Barnett, James. "The 'Central African'"; Warner, Jason, and Charlotte Hulme. "The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating fighter numbers in cells across the continent." *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 7 (2018): 21-28.

3 قتلى من الجيش الموزمبيقي الصليبي وإحراق ثكنة لهم بهجوم جنود الخلافة بولاية موزمبيق

الاثنين 8 شوال 1443 هـ

ولاية موزمبيق

بتوفيق الله تعالى، هاجم جنود الخلافة ثكنة للجيش الموزمبيقي الصليبي، في قرية (كيتراجو) بمنطقة (ماكوميا) في (كابو ديلغادو)، بالأسلحة الرشاشة، ما أدى لمقتل 3 عناصر وإصابة آخرين وفرارهم من المكان، وأحرق المجاهدون الثكنة واغتنموا ما فيها، قبل أن يعودوا إلى مواقعهم سالمين، ولله الحمد.

Image 4: Islamic State claims May 2022 attack with mention of "Wilayat Mozambique"

The Islamic State recently repositioned ISIS-M within in its Africa network by assigning the group to its own territorial province, or *wilayat*.⁴⁸ In the aftermath of ISIS-M's series of May 2022 attacks, ISIS-Central extolled "the soldiers of the Caliphate in Mozambique" and, for the first time, described the group responsible as "Wilayat Mozambique."⁴⁹ Rather than a rhetorical blunder, this seemed to be reinforced when the Islamic State continued to frame ISIS-DRC as its "Central Africa Province" in a separate statement and reportedly created a section for the new province in its weekly newspaper, *Al-Naba*.⁵⁰ This comes at an interesting time as the militants in Mozambique have largely lost control of any previously held territory and urban bases. Still, for those who continue to harbor doubts about the ISIS-ASWJ link, this statement provides further evidence that the Islamic State is attentive to its affiliate in Mozambique and considers it a consequential node in its global network.

⁴⁸ Tara Candland, Ryan O'Farrell, Laren Poole, and Caleb Weiss. "The Rising Threat to Central Africa: The 2021 Transformation of the Islamic State's Congolese Branch." *CTC Sentinel* 15, no. 6 (2022): 1-16; "IS designates Mozambique as its own province following battle in Quiterajo," Zitamar News, May 13, 2022.

⁴⁹ ACLED, Zitamar News, and MediaFax. "Cabo Ligado Weekly: 25 April-8 May 2022.," Hamming, Tore Refslund. "Yesterday the Islamic State Claimed an Attack in Mozambique but This Time It Presented Mozambique as a Separate Province (Wilayat Mozambique) Contrasting the Usual Central Africa Province. per Data from @Ex_Trac This Comes after a Month & a Half without Any Attacks in the Country." Twitter, May 10, 2022.

<https://twitter.com/ToreRHamming/status/1523916989995143168?s=20&t=mYQvnC4NMsBaeyQZAGn8Ag>.

⁵⁰ Anzalone, Christopher. "Islamic State Has Separated Affiliated Mozambican Militants I to Their Own 'Wilaya'/Province, Keeping DR Congo Militants as 'Central Africa Province': Pic.twitter.com/35m28ncry7." Twitter. Twitter, May 11, 2022. <https://twitter.com/lbnSiqilli/status/1524398287314432003?s=20&t=FpC-75cUWSlpt1Z9Fv8vg>; Hamming, Tore Refslund. "The New Wilayat #Mozambique Now Has Its Own Section in the Islamic State's Weekly Al-Naba Too." Twitter. May 13, 2022. <https://twitter.com/torerhamming/status/1525016633424633856?s=21&t=xKnQKLURPa5oS5an0O2Qw>.

ISIS-M's relationship with ISIS Central is strongest in the informational space and through support networks established in the region. First, and perhaps foremost, the leaderships of both organizations have used the connection for reputational and propaganda value.⁵¹ Brenda Githing'u and Tore Hamming find that, between June 2019 and November 2021, the Islamic State's media department claimed 53 attacks in Mozambique and on "more than 20 occasions" published materials (e.g., graphics or videos) from ISIS-M through its official propaganda outlets.⁵² And ISIS has already claimed more than 58 attacks in Mozambique in 2022.⁵³

Second, there is growing evidence of direct material support from the Islamic State's leadership and network to its affiliate in Mozambique. ISIS-M mostly finances its activities via localized activities to include theft and extortion, kidnap for ransom, and other criminal activities. However, some sources indicate that the ISIS-Central is also providing or facilitating funds for the group through a regional financial network. Most notably, the U.S. State Department announced on 1 March 2022 that "ISIS members and associates in South Africa are playing a role in facilitating the transfer of funds from the top of the ISIS hierarchy to branches across Africa." The U.S. Government subsequently designated four ISIS and ISIS-Mozambique financial facilitators in South Africa.⁵⁴ That said, the decentralized and disparate distribution of the group's fighting units and the current level of counterinsurgent presence may limit the group's ability to put these resources into the hands of its fighters. This would create incentives for combat units to self-support through looting, extortion, and ambushes on existing arms depots – again placing emphasis on the group's local connections over its global partnerships.

Understanding the nature of ISIS-M's relationship to the Islamic State's global enterprise offers critical insight:

- ❖ Within the ISIS network, ISIS-M acts autonomously, as a "sovereign subordinate" and primarily benefits from its affiliation with the Islamic State through branding rather than material transfers.⁵⁵ There is little to no evidence that ISIS-Central plays a substantive role in overseeing, designing, or organizing ISIS-M's military activities.

⁵¹ Barnett, James. "The 'Central African' Jihad: Islamism and Nation-Building in Mozambique and Uganda." by James Barnett, October 29, 2020. <https://www.hudson.org/research/16471-the-central-african-jihad-islamism-and-nation-building-in-mozambique-and-uganda>.

⁵² Mugeci Githing'u and Hamming, "The Arc of Jihad."

⁵³ Analytics, Jihad, Twitter, July 1, 2022. https://twitter.com/Jihad_Analytics/status/1542841348105043968.

⁵⁴ Price, Ned. "Designation of ISIS Organizers and Financial Facilitators Based in South Africa - United States Department of State." U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State, March 1, 2022. <https://www.state.gov/designation-of-isis-organizers-and-financial-facilitators-based-in-south-africa/>.

⁵⁵ Warner, *The Islamic State in Africa*.

- ❖ It should not be discounted that the group's current and future tactical and operational profile may increasingly be inspired by the Islamic State's leadership or the behavior of other ISIS affiliates in the region. The extent to which ISIS-M may import new TTPs from its parent organization or peers should remain a point of analytic focus.

Conclusions

The March 2021 attack on Palma garnered considerable credibility for ISIS-M both regionally and within the global jihadist enterprise. The assault also provoked a bolstered military response to the crisis. As a result, less than five months after Palma, the group was ousted from its base in Mocimboa da Praia and faced a string of additional battlefield losses. ISIS-M has adjusted its operational profile over the past several months, waging a guerrilla-style campaign marked by both severe violence and an irregular tempo. It continues to pose significant, sustained threat within its areas of operation with more limited immediate implications for security outside of the region.

The promotion of ISIS-M to its own *wilayat* should not be hurriedly dismissed as political theater. It builds on an extant strategic partnership and may mark a consequential shift for the Islamic State's operations in central and southern Africa. This is yet to be seen. In Mozambique, this new designation is unlikely to herald notable changes to ISIS-M's trajectory and capabilities at the strategic level. Whether as "wing" or as *wilayat*, ISIS-M faces strong constraints in the form of heightened counterinsurgency pressure and targeted operations against its regional network connections. In the near term, the group will struggle to capture and hold territory on a pre-Palma level.

Instead, ISIS-M is well positioned to execute a focused, violent, and highly disruptive guerrilla campaign in a bid to outlast the current coalition of Mozambican and regional forces. With the rainy season now over, government forces and regional leaders should be prepared for a possible uptick in the group's operational tempo. If the attacks in early May are any indication, an escalation of assaults on both hard and soft targets is highly plausible. ISIS-M has maintained the materiel capability and organizational knowledge needed to work on multiple fronts, executing ambushes on inland towns or troop positions as well as rapid attacks in coastal cities. In addition to having an outsized effect on local human security, attacks in the latter category risk providing ISIS-Central with an especially strong reputational return on its investment.

Located squarely at the intersection of the jihadist global-local nexus, ISIS-M represents many of the characteristics that have come to define the Islamic State's operations in Africa. The group maintains a sovereign system of command that is primarily responsive to local conditions, while leveraging its affiliation to the Islamic State's global enterprise to legitimize its bid for authority, boost its reputation, and extend its network of recruitment and support. ISIS-M's centers of gravity remain deeply local. The group will communicate and coordinate with the Islamic State, but the majority of the group's engagement with the ISIS transnational network – beyond the sharing of promotional materials – will occur directly with other affiliates across the continent.

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