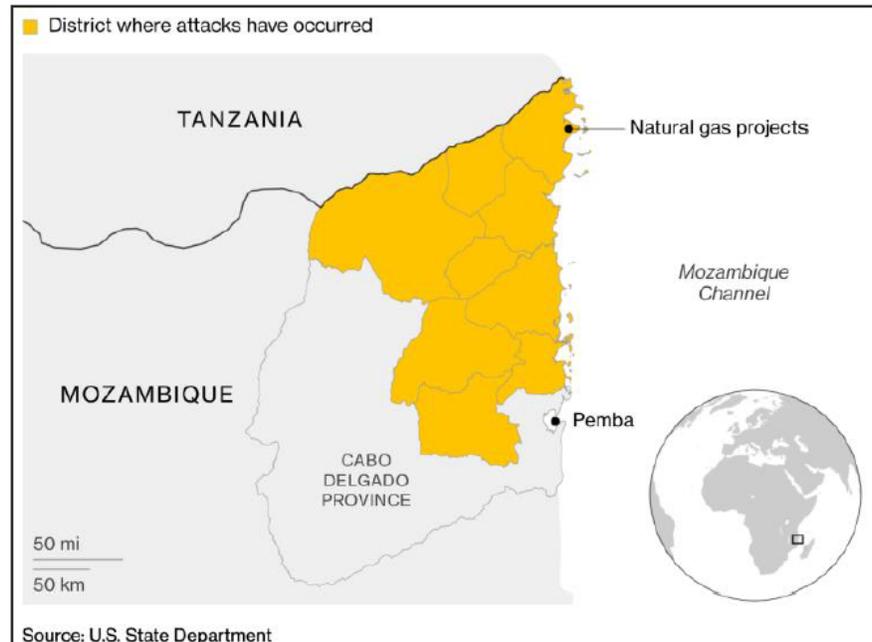


## MOZAMBIQUE: INSURGENTS DESTABILIZE NORTHERN AREAS OF THE COUNTRY

### Summary:

Insurgent activity in northern Mozambique increased this past year, highlighting the inability of the Mozambican government to respond adequately to the insurgency. This situation is further complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The spike in violence will likely continue if left unchecked, possibly allowing the loosely aligned Islamic extremist insurgency to solidify their gains and establish a stronger foothold in the region. Per open-source reporting, the attacks have targeted security forces and infrastructure, making

continued foreign investment in natural resource extraction more difficult, costly, and dangerous. Massive deposits of liquid natural gas (LNG), worth an estimated \$60B, were discovered in 2010 in the deep water offshore of Mozambique's northern province of Cabo Delgado. The LNG reserves provide the potential to transform one of the world's poorest nations. However, the government's inability to effectively stem insurgent violence, coupled with the growing pandemic, threatens foreign investment in Cabo Delgado province and thus the nation's near to medium term economic growth. Mozambique's leaders are pursuing international support to address the violence and the pandemic, but little assistance has materialized thus far.



### BLUF:

- Insurgent militant affiliation with the Islamic State/Al Qaida could facilitate knowledge transfer, expansion of tactics, and recruitment
- Insurgents in northern Mozambique have increased attacks in recent months
- Insurgents have begun targeting infrastructure, complicating international investment
- COVID-19 will likely diminish the government's ability to respond and limit NGOs' ability to operate in the region, exacerbating the regional woes
- International support is key to combatting violence and COVID-19 in Mozambique

### **Linkage to International Terrorist Groups:**

The primary insurgent group in Mozambique is known as Al Sunnah wa Jama'ah (ASWJ) or alternatively as Ansar al-Sunna and is locally referenced as al Shabab, however, the group has no known affiliations with al Shabab in Somalia. Very little is known about the group in terms of leadership or overall organization, goals, or make-up. There has been no public face of the movement or specific goals outlined beyond a general call for the creation of an Islamic state and an adherence to Sharia law, and local UN officers report it may even be separate groups or cells pursuing a number of different aims. The violence likely sprung forth in northern Mozambique in 2015 in response to poverty, frustrations over treatment from the government, and of the spread of Salafist ideology from the Middle East and other parts of East Africa, especially Tanzania.

While no official affiliation has surfaced between the militants operating in Mozambique and international terror groups, the Islamic State (IS) has claimed a caliphate in the region and regularly claims responsibility for attacks in the area. IS has also amplified attacks by the insurgents in northern Mozambique, heralding ASWJ violence from official IS news sources such as Amaq, Nashier, and the Al-Naba newsletter. Additionally, on 22 May, Al Qaida's (AQ) news agency Al Thabat claimed responsibility for an attack in Cabo Delgado Province. AQ and IS's claims of responsibility are not proof of a direct connection with the group but certainly represents a growing interest in the region and a willingness to incorporate the fighting in Mozambique into their larger struggle. The affiliation (either formally or informally) of local Mozambicans with larger international terror groups raises the visibility of the conflict with a wider audience, possibly resulting in international recruitment and fundraising.

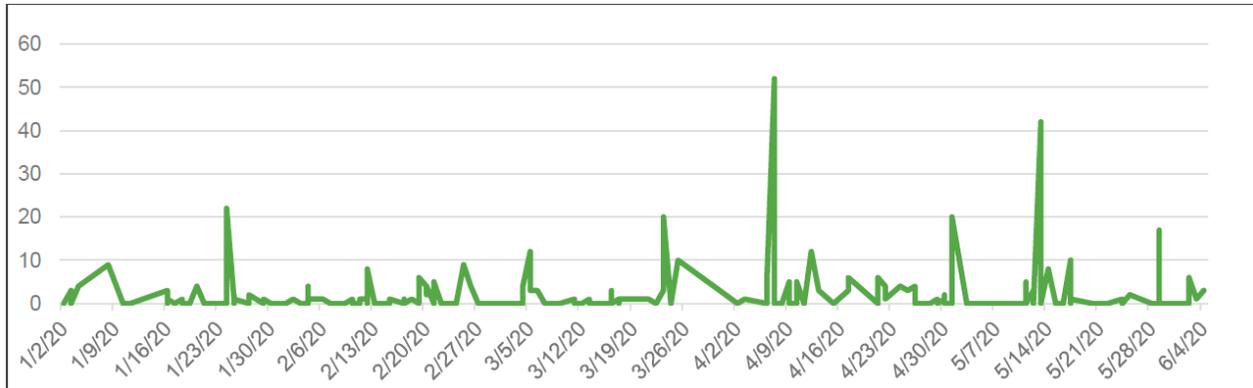
The tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) recently used by the insurgents in Mozambique may be further indications of a closer relationship with international terrorist organizations. For example, reports of IS flags being displayed during attacks, increasing numbers of beheadings, and the kidnapping of girls in the model of Boko Haram (Nigeria) have occurred. Moreover, insurgents have increased attacks on security forces, and reports indicate a private military contracting (PMC) group, Dyck Advisor Group (DAG), lost a helicopter during operations on 10 April, with IS later claiming via social media they shot down the aircraft. Coupled with the insurgent capture of a Yanjing armored vehicle on 11 May and the loss of another DAG aircraft (a fixed-wing "Bat Hawk" aircraft) on 15 June, recent events indicate a growth in the insurgents' tactical capability—or effectiveness, at least. Additionally, insurgents have begun integrating drones into their operations, a tactic used by IS in both Syria and Iraq. While no official knowledge transfer between the groups has been confirmed, indirect TTP sharing appears to have occurred and is shaping ASWJ operations. These new TTPs and the claims of support from international terrorist organizations are a strong indicator of the group's international support and growing maturity.

### **Uptick in Violent Insurgent Operations:**

Widespread violence in the region began in 2017, but the number of attacks and fatalities in northern Mozambique grew dramatically in 2019 and has continued to grow throughout 2020 (see Figure 1). According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), as of mid-June, there have been a total of 447 fatalities due to conflict in Mozambique in 2020. This

total resulted from 200 recorded violent events. The 2020 statistics show a significant increase when compared to the total from last year where there were 660 fatalities in 309 violent events.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, May 2020 saw a 12.3% increase in the number of fatalities over those seen during April and were 26.4% above the monthly average from January to May 2019. Cabo Delgado experienced almost all the violent events, with a minor portion of violent events and fatalities occurring in Niassa province, located immediately west of Cabo Delgado.

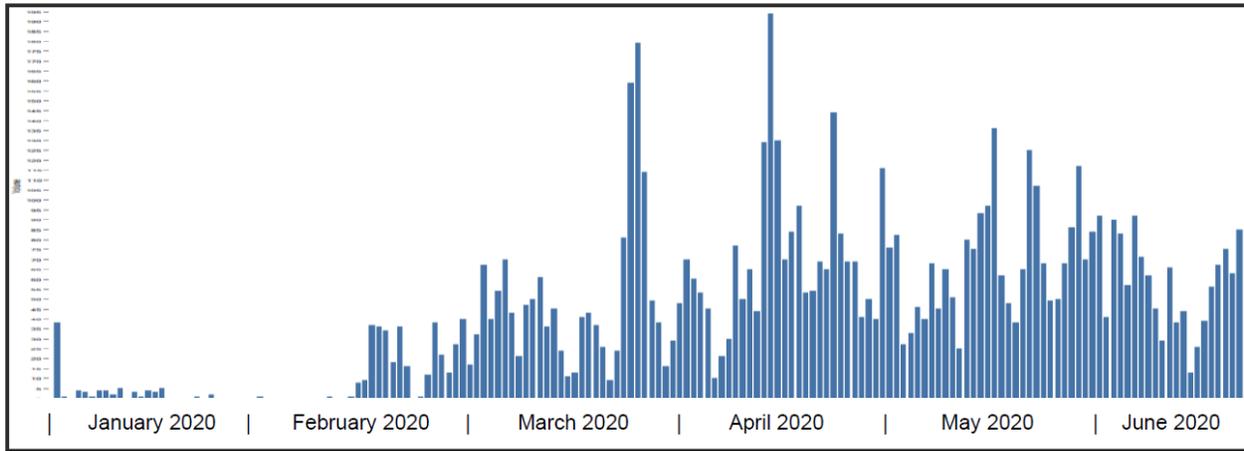
*Figure 1: 2020 Fatalities in Mozambique*



Exact and reliable figures for incidents and casualties for northern Mozambique are difficult to obtain, owing to the confluence of multiple languages spoken in the area, its remoteness, and the difficulty in finding location-specific data caused by variations in location spellings. However, by leveraging Babel Street’s unique open-source data capabilities and through analytic tradecraft and techniques, Babel Street analysts were able to collect a range of data on violence in northern Mozambique. They noted a consistency in reporting on the uptick in violence with activity across four major open-source collections: 1) IntelCenter-vetted reporting of attacks, press releases, and claims of recognition by insurgent or affiliated groups in Mozambique; 2) local and international news sources; 3) Telegram discussions; and 4) blogs, message boards, and select social media platforms. Spikes were noted during the end of March, mid-April, and in the latter half of May (Figure 2). This meta-analysis of online discussions of violence further demonstrates the increasing scale of insurgent activity in northern Mozambique.

<sup>1</sup> <https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard>

Figure 2: Online Volume of Violence Related Content



### Targeting of Regional Infrastructure:

Since mid-May, insurgent objectives and target selection have seemingly shifted to include not only security forces but also infrastructure across northern Mozambique. The Global Initiative, a Geneva-based organization focusing on transnational crime, believes that insurgent tactics are transitioning from “hit-and-run” attacks to those designed to take and hold territory. In Cabo Delgado, insurgents conducted a series of these “take-and-hold” attacks starting on 23 March with a major assault on the port town of Macimboa Da Praia. Two weeks later (6-10 Apr), smaller, short-term occupations of villages located in the districts of Quissanga, Quirimbas, and Muidumbe took place. Further evidence of the insurgents’ broadening strategy is their move to begin blocking roads and targeting bridges and telecom infrastructure. The shift in the groups’ modus operandi, and possibly their overall goals, paints a challenging picture for any outside organization looking to operate in northern Mozambique. Indeed, news reports indicate that the French oil and gas giant Total has increased its security posture by hiring former French Foreign Legionnaires and has begun to set up local commando units to secure the company’s assets. These actions and similar ones taken by other international corporations potentially set the scene for additional flash points with ASWJ.

### COVID-19 and Possible Humanitarian Crisis:

In addition to increased violence, COVID-19 infections have been on the rise across Mozambique. News reports available via Babel Channels speculate that the COVID-19 pandemic may severely impede the government’s ability to provide basic services and will impact its ability to conduct security operations against insurgent forces. While official reporting of COVID-19 cases currently reflects a low infection rate (859 confirmed cases with 5 deaths), comprehensive numbers are difficult given the lack of testing available in Mozambique.<sup>2</sup> What is certain is that the limitations of the nation’s health care infrastructure would likely make a widespread outbreak of COVID-19 devastating. A major outbreak of COVID-19 in the country would likely severely reduce the government’s ability to respond to militant actions and would

<sup>2</sup> According to Johns Hopkins University data accessed through Babel Street software on 28 June 2020.

inhibit the ability for NGOs to provide aid to underserved populations across the country, particularly in northern Mozambique where the insurgency is most active. Fully cognizant of these potentialities, the Mozambique government has taken action to lower the risk of spread... but hereto, government action has been a series of missteps. For example, Mozambican police killed two civilians celebrating Eid al-Fitr at a mosque while attempting to enforce a state of emergency order banning gatherings of more than 20 people.

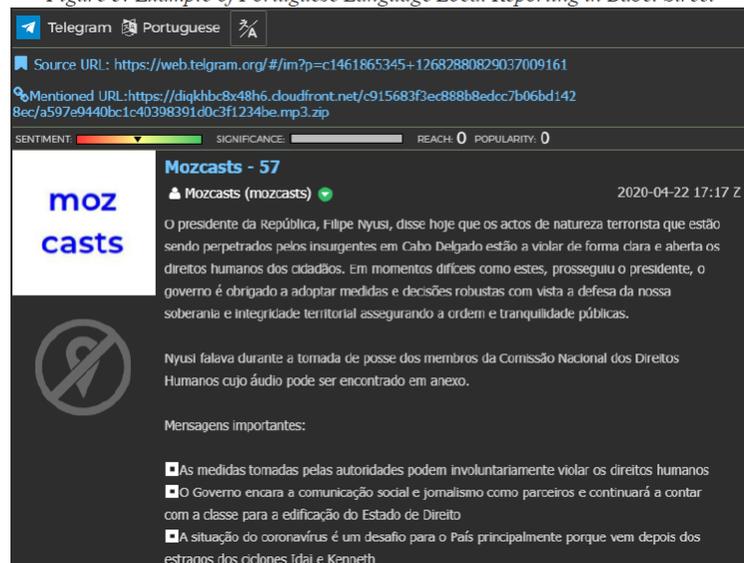
Reporting further suggests Mozambicans are returning home from across Africa, which may further strain government resources and expand COVID-19 infections. Local news reporting indicates that during early May, thousands of Mozambicans flooded across its southern border with South Africa as the mining industry—a major source of work for expatriated Mozambicans—closed due to COVID-19. Estimates indicate that up to 23,000 people may have returned home during the first half of May, creating additional vectors for community transmission and burdens on the social system. The growing challenges faced by the Mozambican government will likely exacerbate relations with underserved portions of the population in the north and could provide a recruiting ground for insurgents.

### Mozambique’s Response and Search for International Support:

Based on the challenges noted above, Mozambique faces the serious possibility of long-term destabilization. External support has been integral to Mozambique’s response to the insurgency thus far, and additional outside assistance will likely be the single most critical factor in facing these challenges. President Filipe Nyusi has requested international support on multiple occasions, including in January at the UK-Africa Summit and more recently in mid-May when he attempted to generate regional support at the South African Development Community (SADC) conference. However, in the weeks following the SADC conference little more than promises of support have materialized from the regional partners. The SADC’s tepid response to Mozambique’s insurgency is likely driven by the group’s focus on the regional COVID-19 crisis.

Some international assistance is coming in form of PMCs, which bring their own challenges. Specifically, social media posts in mid-May indicated a DAG strike due to non-payment and concerns over possible legal issues. Recent reporting, however, indicates that DAG remains active in counter-insurgency operations throughout northern Mozambique. Additionally, news sources report that DAG may be facing PMC competition, with unnamed Mozambican officials

Figure 3: Example of Portuguese Language Local Reporting in Babel Street



suggesting a UAE-based company could be hired. Possible new PMC involvement and the recent turmoil for DAG further highlight the volatile working environment for any forces involved in the fight against the insurgency and will introduce added complications to any future counter-insurgency operations.

### **Conclusion:**

Tracking emerging issues across a multilingual environment is difficult. Leveraging Babel Street's multilingual text analytics capabilities to identify content in native languages and its wide range of open data sources proved critical to understanding the evolving threat landscape in Mozambique (see Figure 3). Increased insurgent violence and a growing infection rate of COVID-19 pose serious challenges to Mozambique over the immediate and longer terms. As both issues continue, a humanitarian crisis and a failure of basic services in the region becomes more likely—jeopardizing the much needed foreign investment that may prove critical to Mozambique weathering its multiple challenges.

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*Analysis is based on information derived from publicly or commercially available data sources. Babel Street expresses no representations, warranties, or assurances on the accuracy of the publicly available data but has used analytical rigor in generating its assessment.*