

Commentary

BEYOND THE GUN: WHY MILITARY INTERVENTION CANNOT BE A PERMANENT SOLUTION IN CABO DELGADO

The threat of Rwanda's withdrawal from Cabo Delgado pending the renewal of funding under the European Union (EU) peace fund should serve as a wake-up call to the Mozambican government. It is clear that sustainable peace cannot be achieved through military intervention. This paper focuses on the Cabo Delgado conflict that has, unsurprisingly, become a protracted war against a jihadist group referred to as the Islamic State Mozambique (ISM). Despite a reduction in large-scale attacks as experienced in early 2021, the jihadist group remains resilient, continuing to carry out attacks against civilians, government, and public infrastructure. Military interventions by SADC and Rwandan forces have weakened the group's fighting capability, helped recover territory, and facilitated the return of many internally displaced people. However, ISM has shown resilience, carrying out sporadic attacks that leave the general population vulnerable. This paper therefore argues that military intervention, while necessary for immediate security, cannot provide a sustainable as experienced elsewhere across the continent; hence, this should serve as a wake-up call to the government of Mozambique to explore other avenues for sustainable peace. The government must not be preoccupied with extending bilateral military agreements as the best solution to the problem; instead, it must leverage the security space Rwanda offers to tackle the root causes of the conflict.

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Introduction

Prior to the emergence of the Cabo Delago insurgency, Southern Africa was generally perceived as a relatively stable and peaceful region following the end of the Cold War. The region has largely been spared the severe effects of Islamist insurgency and terrorism. However, the security crisis in Northern

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Mozambique has demonstrated that the region is not immune to terrorism¹. On October 5, 2017, a group named Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaa carried out attacks in northern Cabo Delgado. The group continued to carry out attacks and diversified its strategies to commit heinous crimes against civilians, the government, and public infrastructure. The advent of this group in the region made Mozambique the epicentre of a violent conflict in the Southern African region, leaving many dead and thousands displaced since 2017.² The group leveraged both the extremist Islamist ideology and local socioeconomic discontent to justify its actions and attacks on towns, military installations, and infrastructure. As of 2022, the group officially declared itself a member of the Islamic State and rebranded as Islamic State – Mozambique (ISM) and strengthened its link to the transnational jihadist networks.³

The Government's Response to the Conflict

In the initial stages of the conflict, the government ignored warning signs, labelling the attacks as 'acts of banditry' rather than as acts of terrorism or violent extremism, thus doing less to address the problem and indirectly contributing to its escalation.⁴ It was only after almost two years that the government acknowledged that the country was facing a terrorist threat, having previously rejected claims that the perpetrators were linked to international Islamic movements. However, from 2017, the government's response was predominantly based on a traditional security approach utilising its defence and security forces. When this approach failed, the government assistance from foreign private military companies. The government subsequently brought in bilateral partners such as Rwanda, multilateral actors such as the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM), and international partners, including the European Union Training Mission in Mozambique (EUTM-Moz) and US missions.⁵ As Arena puts it, the Cabo Delgado insurgency "triggered an unprecedented overlap of peace

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support interventions by distinct African actors – Rwanda, SADC, and the African Union (AU) – that operated simultaneously but under separate mandates and command structures.⁶ The case of Cabo Delgado presents a coexistence of multiple, overlapping security regimes operating without formal integration.

The Rwandan Intervention in Cabo Delgado

As one of the active military actors in the conflict, Rwandan entered Mozambique in July 2021 under a bilateral arrangement between the two countries, comprising approximately 1,000 troops and police personnel. Rwanda intervened following the jihadists' attack that led to the suspension of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) projects. The troops were strategically deployed in Palma, where major LNG projects are located, and Mocimboa da Praia, an important LNG development hub. The intervention further strained Rwanda's relations with South Africa and Tanzania.⁷

Rwanda's deployment ahead of the regional forces, following delays by the Mozambican government, was perceived as a challenge to existing regional dynamics and geopolitical

influence, with South Africa arguing that its deployment should have been within the SADC's regional mandate. The Organ was also disappointed by Mozambique's decision to allow the deployment of Rwandan troops ahead of the regional force. The backlash surrounding Rwanda's deployment created difficulties among the actors on the battlefield, undermining SAMIM's operational effectiveness. Tensions between SAMIM troops and Mozambique forces increased over command responsibilities, competition, and limited cooperation, all of which hindered joint operations. Mozambican forces, which had limited capabilities, inadequate training, and low morale, largely relied on Rwandan and SADC troops to lead in direct engagements with insurgents. SADC troops complained about poor communication and cooperation from the Mozambique side, resulting in ineffective intelligence sharing.⁸

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However, until the end of the SAMIM in July 2024, the mission had helped reclaim much of the territory previously held by jihadists, facilitated the return of thousands of displaced civilians, and assisted the government in beginning reconstruction projects under the Northern Integrated Development Agency (ADIN). Following SAMIM's withdrawal, Rwanda increased its presence to fill the security vacuum left by the SADC mission. Rwandan troops have maintained the running of the major energy projects, made possible by the experienced 4000 soldiers deployed in the region.⁹

Security analysts argue that behind this intervention, Rwanda is strongly interested in protecting its economic interests in the extractive sector, as well as the interests of its Western allies, including France, whose company TotalEnergies is one of the investors in the region¹⁰. This interpretation is consistent with the presence of Rwandan companies in the region and with frequent statements by Rwanda's foreign minister, who stated, "... *Rwandan troops are constantly questioned, vilified, criticised, blamed by the very countries that greatly benefit from our intervention in Mozambique. Indeed, we are ready to leave Mozambique if our work and achievements are not appreciated*". These arguments followed speculations that the EU might not renew its funding for the mission, and Rwanda responded by threatening to withdraw its troops from Cabo Delgado to pressure the EU to provide funding¹¹

With this, Rwanda was flexing its muscles to remind its European partners that significant interests were at stake if funding was not secured. It is a fact that the Rwandan troops are highly trained and effective, presenting a strong security partner across the continent in a period where Western interventions have lost their legitimacy, with Africans preferring 'African solutions to African problems. Therefore, Rwanda has consequently emerged as an important security partner through which Western interests can be indirectly protected especially in resource-rich regions such as Cabo Delgado.

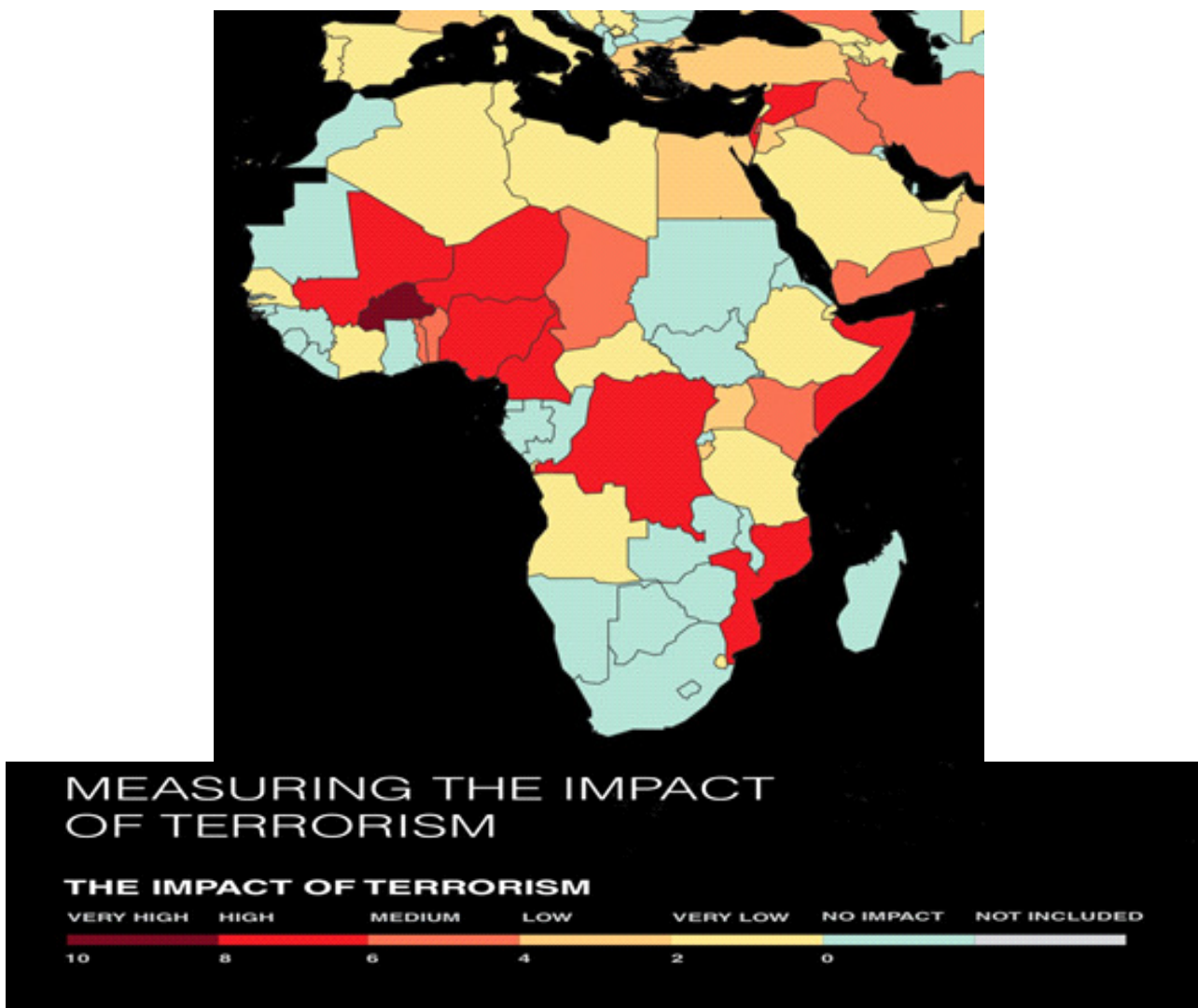
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However, the overreliance of African nations on the West for funding poses a major challenge to the concept of finding 'African solutions to African problems'. The dependence on external financing therefore raises questions about who ultimately exercise authority over ostensibly African-led interventions.

Today, Rwanda continues to provide security in the region alongside the Mozambican forces. Although large-scale attacks may have declined, sporadic attacks reveal the resilience and determination of IS-Mozambique to continue its campaign despite being weakened. The recent terrorism index shows that the impact of terrorism in Mozambique remains high, and the violence against citizens has persisted¹².

Figure 1: The Impact of Terrorism in Africa



Source: (The Institute for Economic & Peace, 2026)

Reports from EUMAM Mozambique and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) indicate that IS-Mozambique continues to launch attacks against civilians, contributing to insecurity, displacement, and a humanitarian crisis. With terrorism remaining a major security threat in the region, the ongoing conflict has resulted in the deaths of more than 6000 people and displaced over a million^{13, 14}. One lesson from the predominantly militaristic approach in Cabo Delgado is that the military interventions prolong instability, undermine human security, and continue the reliance on external security support. The reliance and dependence on Rwandan troops show the structural vulnerabilities of Mozambique's stabilisation strategy. This approach exposes the country to major and unpredictable risks motivated by external actors and unresolved local grievances¹⁵.

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The Way Forward

The Mozambican government must work towards taking a leadership role in the fight against terrorism in the region. The current reliance on Rwandan troops and external funding is unsustainable. As demonstrated by Rwanda's threats to withdraw if funding is not provided, such dependence creates significant uncertainty, leaving the region at risk. Political and economic interests can shift; the Mozambique government should not treat the Rwandan intervention as a permanent mission and work towards achieving sustainable peace in the region.

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Therefore, the crux of the matter is for Mozambique to utilize the security space currently provided by Rwanda's intervention to tackle the root causes of the conflict. The crucial question is whether the government of Mozambique has leveraged the security spaces provided by both SAMIM and the Rwandan troops. The question should not mainly be about whether the Rwandan mission will be renewed or whether the European Union will extend its funding when the agreements expire. Approaching this insecurity issue from this perspective serves as a reminder to the government that they should work towards attaining sustainable peace in the region, that peace cannot be achieved only through force.

This implies that although the military intervention is crucial to providing security in the region, it should not be perceived as a permanent solution. Military interventions have not come close to resolving the humanitarian crisis; the approach has been effective in protecting the multinational corporate assets, but it ignores the human security of vulnerable local populations. Hence, the government must use the security space offered by this approach to explore different avenues for peacebuilding.

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cohesion, and create up to 100,000 jobs by 2029. The programme has progressed by 30% at the end of 2025, and the leadership has vowed to accelerate the various initiatives under the programme¹⁶. There are also other stakeholders, including international organisations and local NGOs, who are also implementing various projects aimed at improving the socioeconomic conditions of people in the region¹⁷.

Although these initiatives demonstrates the government's efforts to adopt a multisectoral approach to addressing the problem, the structure of these projects and the limited participation of civil society have attracted criticism. Tavares argues that the Cabo Delgado reconstruction plan ignores the structuring role of civil society in the response to the crisis in the province¹⁸, and one key programme, the Mozambique Resilience and Integrated Development Programme (PREDIN), was criticised for a heavy, centralised structure with weak participation of communities and civil society¹⁹. This limited inclusion may also restrict access to information and the ability of stakeholders to hold decision-makers accountable. Each program designed for Cabo Delgado must include all the stakeholders and ensure that they have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

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Most importantly, the government must invest in building trust with local communities. This can be achieved by first addressing the injustices that contributed to the emergence of the insurgency to ensure that the root causes, triggers, and the local grievances that the jihadist group claims to represent are addressed. The government should create a platform for free dialogue with the local leadership and their communities to address issues such as the violent and

unlawful land expropriation carried out without adequate consultation with local communities. A lack of dialogue to address such issues will always be a barrier to peace in the region, and no number of economic packages or military interventions will ever resolve such issues. In the future, the government must extend the dialogue to the youth who are active in jihad through the creation of deradicalisation and re-education facilities, political amnesty, and disarmament. Given the group's weakened condition, such measures could further disrupt its organisational capacity and reduce its ability to recruit new members.

Moreover, considering the ethnic diversity in the region, with major groups such as the Makonde, Makua, and Mwani found across the region, it is important to address discrimination and the marginalisation of minority groups. There must be an end to systemic marginalisation in political and socio-economic life, and government representatives must ensure that they treat people equally regardless of their ethnic background. Such measures would contribute to rebuilding trust with marginalised communities and restoring the government's legitimacy.

Lastly, the government must strengthen its institutions at the local, provincial, and central levels through meaningful grassroot participation. The government must ensure that local communities are involved in decisions that affect their lives. Without strong institutions, good governance will never be achieved at the local and provincial levels, leading to the failure of any reconstruction efforts. Stronger institutions could improve equitable service delivery and the management of public resources, including the benefits from the extractive industries.

CONCLUSION

The Cabo Delgado conflict has turned out to be a protracted war against jihadists. The Rwandan troops have taken a leading role in the fight against ISM since the withdrawal of SAMIM in 2024. The current approach in Cabo Delgado remains predominantly military, with much of the security effort focused on protecting the regions billion-dollar LNG projects. Military interventions, however, cannot by itself deliver sustainable peace. Although it has helped protect multinational corporations and LNG projects, the continued vulnerability of civilian populations demonstrates the limits of a predominantly military approach.

The government must not be overly reliant on military interventions and prioritize other avenues for peacebuilding. These include working closely with the local communities, addressing governance issues by promoting dialogue and inclusive decision-making, addressing the local grievances over historical land, ending ethnic discrimination and marginalisation, and, most importantly, resource governance, ensuring that the community benefits from the extractive industries. These measures would contribute to rebuilding trust, restoring state legitimacy, and addressing the root causes of the conflict.

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