

Mozambique: Rethinking Conflict Management in Cabo Delgado. From Military Containment to Sustainable Conflict Management

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Abstract: The armed conflict that erupted in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado Province in 2017 and evolved into one of the most complex security crises in Southeast Africa has persisted despite sustained regional and international military interventions. Nearly 8,000 people have reportedly been killed, and over one million have been displaced since 2017. Despite military interventions by Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania, and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), alongside support from the European Union and the United States, the conflict has persisted and expanded geographically. The continued capacity of Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jama'a (ASWJ) to extend its operations into new areas, even following the withdrawal of the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) in 2024 and amid the ongoing military presence of Rwanda and Tanzania, highlights the limitations of security-centered approaches. The crisis cannot be explained solely in terms of counterterrorism or radical ideology. Rather, it is rooted in structural dynamics associated with the legacy of Mozambique's

independence in 1975, FRELIMO's political policies, ethno-regional marginalization—including divisions between Makonde elites and Mwani and Makua communities—and the dispossession and relative deprivation generated by large-scale liquefied natural gas (LNG) and mining projects. Drawing on qualitative conflict analysis and a case study methodology, this article examines the Cabo Delgado crisis from a conflict management perspective. It argues that the persistence of the conflict reflects a critical gap between military containment and sustainable conflict management. While external military interventions have temporarily constrained insurgent territorial expansion, they have been insufficient on their own to transform

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the social, institutional, and socioeconomic dynamics underlying the crisis. The article contributes to the conflict management literature by demonstrating that sustainable stability in Cabo Delgado requires moving beyond short-term military containment toward an integrated approach that combines security measures with political dialogue, inclusive governance, meaningful local participation, equitable resource distribution, and socioeconomic development.

Keywords: Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, conflict management, structural causes of conflict, ASWJ.

Introduction

The United Nations Security Council's 2026 report on ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida, and associated individuals and entities opens its section on Central and Southern Africa by noting that, in Cabo Delgado Province, Mozambique, despite ongoing multinational military operations, Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jama'a (ASWJ) has an estimated strength of 400–500 fighters. The report further notes that ASWJ continues to recruit new members and has expanded its activities southward into neighboring provinces (UN Security Council, 2026). When terrorism or armed conflict in Africa is discussed, Portuguese-speaking Mozambique may not be among the first cases that come to mind compared with Francophone or Anglophone African states. Nevertheless, the violence and conflict that have persisted in the country for nearly a decade—and which, as the Security Council report indicates, are unlikely to come to an end in the near future—have now emerged as one of the most significant security challenges in Southern Africa.

The conflict that emerged in Cabo Delgado in 2017, and which was initially neglected both by scholars and, particularly during its early years, by policymakers within the central government (Shurkin, 2021), has become too complex to be understood solely as a problem of terrorism. Over the past decade, the conflict has acquired an increasingly international character, involving a broad range of regional states, global actors, international organizations, NGOs, and even private military companies such as the Wagner Group and the Dyck Advisory Group, alongside actors ranging from Rwanda and Tanzania to the United States, the European Union, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). As a result, the conflict has evolved into one of the most protracted armed conflicts in Southeast Africa. Since the first violent attack on October 5, 2017, nearly 8,000 people have reportedly lost their lives, thousands have been injured, and more than one million people have been displaced. Following ASWJ's pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State in 2019, the escalating cycle of violence has increasingly emerged as a concern at both the regional and global security levels (Kambela, 2025).

Although the armed conflict became manifest in 2017, this study argues that the underlying causes of violence in Cabo Delgado extend back to Mozambique's independence in 1975 and that the ensuing cycle of violence is too multidimensional to be understood merely as

a manifestation of terrorism. Understanding the conflict that emerged in 2017 requires an examination of both the structural conditions associated with Mozambique's "state capacity, governance, and security deficits" and the local dynamics specific to Cabo Delgado, particularly "non-inclusive economic growth and the natural resource problem" (Faria, 2021). The conflict, therefore, cannot be adequately explained without considering the interaction between broader structural weaknesses within the Mozambican state and the region-specific political, economic, and socioeconomic grievances that have shaped the trajectory of violence in Cabo Delgado.

Analyzing the Structural Roots of the Cycle of Violence in Mozambique

The centrality of the global fight against terrorism in world politics, Africa's emergence as an arena for global terrorist organizations, and the self-identification of actors involved in violent activities with terrorist organizations have contributed to the tendency to interpret the conflict in Cabo Delgado through the broad lens of Islamist terrorism and extremism. For instance, the Status of Forces Agreement concluded in July 2021 to facilitate the deployment of the Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) explicitly defined the mission's objective as "combating actors of terrorism and violent extremism by neutralizing the threat and restoring security in order to create a secure environment" (ACLED, 2026). Similarly, the conflict in Mozambique has been widely framed as a manifestation of Islamist or jihadist terrorism. According to Bussotti and Torres (2020), for example, the Mozambican government's failure to perceive Islamist terrorism as a strategic risk from the early 2010s onward constituted a major factor behind the expansion of Islamist extremism in Cabo Delgado. They further argue that the authoritarian and fragile nature of the Mozambican state adversely affected the effectiveness of efforts to counter Islamist terrorism.

However, when the SAMIM mission, established specifically to combat "actors of terrorism and violent extremism", concluded its mandate in 2024, the conflict and violence in Cabo Delgado had not come to an end. This outcome suggests that the conflict cannot be adequately understood solely through the prism of Islamist terrorism (Sitoe, 2026). Indeed, in her widely cited comprehensive study of the Mozambican conflict, published in May 2017, Regalia makes no reference to Cabo Delgado, terrorism, or Islam. Instead, she identifies the ownership and governance of natural resources as fundamental issues underlying the country's post-independence political trajectory, particularly in the context of the long-standing dominance of the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO). She also emphasizes that Mozambique's economic growth since the end of the civil war has failed to generate broad-based benefits for the population (Regalia, 2017). From this perspective, the structural roots of the cycle of violence that emerged in Cabo Delgado in 2017 can be traced to Mozambique's independence in 1975 and the historical legacy of the state-building processes that followed.

Immediately after independence, the FRELIMO government established a one-party political system and implemented socialist policies that often failed to accommodate the sociocultural, ethnic, and religious characteristics of Cabo Delgado (Afriyie & Arkorful, 2021). Policies such as villagization, which forcibly relocated local populations to communal settlements, constituted some of the earliest structural processes contributing to the historical alienation between the state and northern communities (Blanes et al., 2023). This historical estrangement was subsequently intensified by the dominance of Maputo-centered political elites and the development of a natural-resource extraction model closely associated with politically influential sections of the Makonde community, particularly in the context of the region's substantial natural gas and ruby resources. The resulting processes of dispossession and exclusion contributed to a growing sense of relative deprivation among local communities (Mattioli, 2026).

Accordingly, interpreting the insurgency simply as an expression of religious fanaticism or as a manifestation of “global terrorism” risks obscuring the underlying political and socioeconomic conditions that have enabled violence to emerge and persist, while also reinforcing the limitations of predominantly security-oriented responses.

The armed conflict that began in 2017 has consequently evolved into a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be adequately captured through the concepts of terrorism and violent extremism alone. Its persistence has been shaped not only by the activities of armed groups that have adopted violence as a means of pursuing their objectives, but also by structural factors, including political and economic exclusion, governance deficits, socioeconomic inequalities, competition over natural resources, and tensions between state institutions and local communities. The nature and persistence of the conflict should therefore be examined not merely as a military confrontation between security forces and armed groups, but through the interaction of the political, economic, institutional, and social dynamics that reproduce the conflict environment (Ozluk & Saide, 2025).

The persistence of the conflict since 2017 further raises questions about the effectiveness of predominantly military approaches to conflict management. Although military interventions have enabled the government to reestablish control in certain areas and, at particular points, contributed to a substantial reduction in the estimated number of militants, from approximately 4,000 to as few as 300, the violence concentrated in Cabo Delgado has not been brought to an end. This raises the central research question of this study: Why have these efforts, despite the contributions of regional states, the deployment of the SAMIM mission, and the military interventions of the Mozambican central government—which has prioritized military instruments since the beginning of the conflict and achieved a degree of short-term containment—failed to translate into sustainable conflict management after nearly a decade of violence?

This question points to the limitations of assessing the conflict solely in terms of military capacity and territorial control. The persistence of violence, its expansion into new areas, continued civilian displacement, tensions between local communities and security actors,

and difficulties surrounding political dialogue indicate that the Cabo Delgado conflict constitutes a conflict management problem that extends beyond its military dimension. Indeed, nearly 21,000 people were displaced by conflict-related violence in May and June 2026 alone, despite the various interventions undertaken over the preceding years (Zitamar News, 2026). The effectiveness of nearly a decade of conflict management should therefore not be measured solely by reductions in ASWJ's operational capacity or limitations on the territory under its control. Without understanding the historical, political, and socioeconomic dynamics upon which the conflict has developed, the persistence of violence in Mozambique cannot be adequately explained.

Building on this premise, this study seeks to reassess the Cabo Delgado conflict from a conflict management perspective. Its principal contribution to the conflict management literature is to demonstrate, through the Cabo Delgado case, the analytical distinction between containing a conflict and managing it sustainably. The study argues that military interventions may, to a certain extent, limit the geographical expansion and immediate intensity of the conflict but cannot, by themselves, produce sustainable conflict management or resolution. The Cabo Delgado case therefore raises the broader question of how security-centered interventions can be integrated with governance reform, political inclusion, local participation, and socioeconomic development policies. Such an approach requires moving beyond the immediate objective of containing armed violence toward addressing the structural conditions that continue to reproduce the conflict.

Structural Causes Leading to Conflict in Mozambique

Following its independence from Portuguese colonial rule in 1975, Mozambique faced prolonged political instability and armed conflict. The struggle between the new political order shaped under the leadership of FRELIMO in the post-independence period and RENAMO evolved into a devastating civil war that lasted until 1992 and was closely intertwined with the regional geopolitical competition of the Cold War (Emerson, 2014). The holding of multiparty elections in 1994, following the Rome Peace Accords that brought the civil war to an end, constituted an important milestone in the country's transition from conflict to peaceful political competition. However, the termination of the civil war did not entirely eliminate conflict dynamics in Mozambique. The continuation of FRELIMO's political dominance, debates surrounding the distribution of economic and political resources, and recurring tensions between RENAMO and the government led to low-intensity armed conflicts once again in the 2010s. Shortly before this conflict cycle largely came to an end through a comprehensive peace agreement in 2019, the country confronted a new security challenge of a distinct nature in the north (Santos, 2024).

The armed violence that erupted in Cabo Delgado in 2017 revealed a new form of conflict, distinct from Mozambique's previous civil war experience, in which local, regional, and international security dynamics became intertwined. Therefore, understanding the onset



Map 1. Cabo Delgado in Mozambique

Source. AciAfrica, 2021

of the conflict in Cabo Delgado necessitates taking into account the country's historical legacy of conflict, as well as the political, economic, and social vulnerabilities accumulated during the post-independence era (Ntaka, 2023). Explaining the emergence of conflict in Mozambique solely through the activities of armed groups or deficits in security capacity means ignoring the broader structural dynamics that generate conditions conducive to conflict in the country.

The primary dimension of these structural dynamics consists of low human development and widespread socioeconomic deprivation in Mozambique. Mozambique's 2023 Human Development Index (HDI) score stands at 0.493, ranking the country 182nd out of 193 countries and territories in the low human development category (UNDP, 2025). Although this indicator alone does not demonstrate that poverty leads directly to violence, it provides important evidence of how inequalities in the distribution of economic and social opportunities reinforce perceptions of political and social exclusion. Limited access to education, healthcare, employment, and basic public services narrows the channels of economic and social mobility, particularly for the youth population, while undermining expectations regarding the state's capacity to provide security and welfare to its citizens. This situation further widens the structural gap between state capacity and citizens' expectations. Despite Mozambique being rich in natural resources, the inability of broad segments of society to adequately benefit from the economic returns generated by these resources creates not only absolute poverty but also relative deprivation (African Development Bank Group, 2025).

These dynamics are particularly pronounced in Cabo Delgado. The long-standing perception of the region as a “forgotten area” (Cabo Esquecido), juxtaposed with the discovery of significant natural gas and other mineral reserves in recent years, has rendered the contradiction between the economic expectations of local communities and their actual living conditions more visible (Kudakwashe, 2024). The discovery of natural gas and oil reserves has further heightened the perception of relative deprivation among the youth population, who view themselves as historically excluded from economic opportunities (Sitoe, 2026). Consequently, rather than acting as a stabilizing factor in itself, the presence of natural resources has shifted questions of who has access to resources and how resource revenues are distributed to the center of conflict dynamics. Although the Mozambican economy relies significantly on natural resource sectors and external financing, substantial discrepancies exist between the benefits these economic activities generate for local communities and the costs they impose. In particular, while large-scale mining and energy projects are framed as instruments of development and economic growth, they can generate land loss, resettlement, disruption of livelihoods, and social inequalities at the local level.

Another dimension of Mozambique’s structural vulnerability consists of environmental and climate risks. The country’s extensive coastline and geographical position render it particularly susceptible to cyclones, floods, and other extreme weather events. Major cyclones that struck shortly after the onset of the conflict, disproportionately affecting Cabo Delgado and Sofala provinces, placed additional pressure on already fragile social and economic structures (Tivane, 2025). This is because the impacts of climate change are not confined strictly to physical destruction and displacement. Climate-induced displacement, reduced food production, and the depletion of natural resources can intensify resource competition between displaced populations and host communities (Mkuti & Tarusarira, 2025). Climate change thus functions not as a direct driver of conflict, but as a “risk multiplier” that exacerbates existing social vulnerabilities and resource competition.

The regional dimension of the conflict further compounds these structural vulnerabilities. Cabo Delgado’s border with Tanzania is not merely a security boundary but has historically been a space where economic and social relations intersect. Field research by Buchanan-Clarke, Moffat, and Feijó demonstrates that cross-border trade networks, access to healthcare and education services, and social ties suffered significant damage in the aftermath of the conflict. According to these authors, a notable “security paradox” emerges here: security measures aimed at preventing the spillover of conflict across borders can simultaneously weaken the informal cross-border networks that previously supported communities’ economic and social resilience (Buchanan-Clarke, Moffat, & Feijó, 2025). Consequently, while the securitization of borders may mitigate threats in the short term, it can produce outcomes that undermine communities’ resilience in the long run.

All these factors indicate that state fragility in Mozambique is not confined merely to deficits in governance capacity. Data from the Fragile States Index also point to the deepening of this fragility over time alongside the conflict. While Mozambique ranked 40th on the index in 2017, it deteriorated into a more fragile position during the intensification of violence in

Cabo Delgado, rising to 21st place in the 2022–2023 period, and currently stands at 25th out of 179 countries (The Fund for Peace, 2026). This suggests a bidirectional relationship between structural fragility and conflict. On the one hand, low state capacity, economic inequalities, and social exclusion reinforce the conditions under which conflict can emerge; on the other hand, conflict further degrades public services, economic activities, infrastructure, and state capacity, thereby reproducing fragility.

Therefore, the structural causes of the conflict in Mozambique cannot be explained by a single variable. Poverty, low human development, political exclusion, the unequal distribution of natural resources, displacement caused by mega-projects based on natural gas and other resources, youth unemployment, climate-induced vulnerability, and the erosion of cross-border social networks have intersected with deficiencies in state capacity to create a multilayered terrain of conflict (Tembe et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the presence of these structural conditions across Mozambique does not on its own answer why armed violence concentrated specifically in Cabo Delgado. Therefore, an analytical distinction must be drawn between the existence of structural conditions and the emergence of terrorism in a specific region. The following section will examine how structural vulnerabilities at the national level intersected with the unique historical, geographical, socioeconomic, and political conditions of Cabo Delgado to catalyze a violent insurgency environment. This distinction is critical for moving beyond reductionist approaches that explain conflict solely through “poverty and radicalization”, thereby demonstrating why the Cabo Delgado case constitutes a distinct conflict management problem.

Structural Causes Leading to Conflict in Cabo Delgado

While structural problems fueling conflict in Mozambique exist nationwide, the intersection of these issues with the specific historical, geographical, and socioeconomic conditions in Cabo Delgado has rendered the region particularly vulnerable to armed conflict. The first and most prominent dimension of this structure is that Cabo Delgado is a historically marginalized region. The concentration of economic and political resources primarily in the capital, Maputo, and the southern regions of Mozambique has contributed to the development of mistrust toward the central state in the northern provinces (Ozluk & Saide, 2025). Despite being one of the country’s richest regions in terms of natural resources, Cabo Delgado has lagged behind more developed regions in education, healthcare, infrastructure, and employment. Therefore, the fundamental contradiction in the region is not merely poverty but the coexistence of wealth and deprivation within the same geographic area. The World Bank also emphasizes that one of the significant drivers of the conflict in Cabo Delgado is systematic exclusion and associated grievances, noting that limited access to education, political representation, technical skills, and economic resources leaves youth, in particular, excluded from development processes (The World Bank, 2022).

One of the most significant consequences of this inequality is the economic and political exclusion of the youth population. In Cabo Delgado, particularly among young people, limited employment opportunities outside agriculture and fishing, combined with low education levels, have narrowed the avenues for economic mobility (Faria, 2021). Consequently, young people face not only unemployment but also prolonged economic and social exclusion. This situation has widened the gap between the opportunities offered by the state and the expectations of youth, thereby deepening dissatisfaction with the political system.

The second core dimension of structural conflict dynamics in Cabo Delgado is associated with ethnic and regional inequality (Stanyard et al., 2022). The region is home to diverse ethnic communities, most notably the Makua, Mwani, and Makonde. While the Makua group, which constitutes the largest share of the population in Cabo Delgado Province, and the Mwani group, concentrated along the coastal strip, are predominantly Muslim, the Makonde group, residing on the inland plateaus and comprising approximately 20% of the population, is predominantly Christian/Catholic. While 67% of the province's population speaks Emakhuwa, the most common language, Shimakonde is spoken by 22%, and the coastal Mwani language by only 6%. Portuguese, the official language, is spoken by only 22% of the total population across the province (Clear Global, 2026). This linguistic barrier creates a serious disconnect between the state apparatus, security forces, and the local population.

Regional and ethnic inequalities, along with disparities in socioeconomic indicators, are clearly reflected in the available figures. Cabo Delgado is the country's most vulnerable province, with youth unemployment rates exceeding 85% (IMF, 2024). The literacy rate in the region stands at approximately 60%. In terms of infrastructure deficits, only 12.1% of households in Cabo Delgado have access to electricity, while 56.1% of the population completely lacks access to clean water (Sibanda, 2026).

Ethnic groups' relationships with state institutions, political representation, and security institutions further deepen these disparities. The Makonde group, constituting a minority of the population, forms the backbone of the ruling FRELIMO party, which has governed the country since independence, and is dominant in military cadres, civil administrative positions, and commercial privileges. In contrast, the Muslim Mwani community, residing along the coastline and historically supporting the opposition RENAMO party, has been systematically excluded from political and economic power (Ozluk & Saide, 2025).

The third and perhaps most distinguishing element of the Cabo Delgado case is the paradox between natural resource wealth and social exclusion. The region is exceptionally rich in rubies, gold, graphite, and other minerals, in addition to natural gas (Semenova & Churrana, 2025). Particularly following 2010, the discovery of natural gas reserves transformed Cabo Delgado into one of Mozambique's most significant investment areas. However, this economic transformation failed to deliver the inclusive development anticipated by a significant segment of the local population (Ntaka, 2023). Land acquisitions

and resettlement processes carried out as part of large-scale liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects caused certain communities to lose their land and livelihoods while reinforcing perceptions that the local population was not adequately benefiting from new economic activities and employment opportunities (Guhad, 2025). Therefore, natural resources in the Cabo Delgado conflict should not be evaluated simply as a “cause of conflict”, but rather within a resource–grievance relationship that renders existing inequalities visible and politically mobilizable. Indeed, field research demonstrates that a significant portion of the local population views the discovery of natural gas and other natural resources as one of the primary causes of the conflict. In particular, the displacement of local communities from their lands, the damage to their livelihoods, and the perception that employment in the energy sector does not sufficiently reach the regional population have further widened the gap between economic expectations and reality (Wiegink, 2022). This situation highlights the conflict-generating capacity of injustice in resource governance and distribution, rather than a mere “resource curse”.

In conclusion, the structural foundation of the conflict in Cabo Delgado has formed at the intersection of marginalization, youth economic and political exclusion, ethnic and regional inequalities, unjust management of natural resources, displacement, and weak state–society relations. It is precisely at this junction that the emergence of ASWJ gains significance: the rise of the organization should be evaluated not as a direct and automatic outcome of existing structural problems, but rather as a process wherein these grievances were mobilized within a specific ideological framework and converted into organizational capacity.

The Rise of Terrorism in Cabo Delgado: The Anatomy of ASWJ

It is not possible to understand the conflict in Cabo Delgado without analyzing the origins, sociopolitical character, financial structure, recruitment strategies, and relationship with the Islamic State (ISIS) of the group locally referred to as “Al-Shabaab”¹ or “Mashababos”, recently known as Islamic State Mozambique (ISM), but officially named Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jama’a (ASWJ) (Cardoso, 2021). Although ASWJ first made its name known in Cabo Delgado through the 2017 attack on a police station, the foundations of the group trace back to the late 1990s and early 2000s, when individuals who received religious education through scholarships in countries such as Egypt, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia returned to the country (International Crisis Group, 2024). Upon returning to the country, these individuals encountered significant economic hardships in Cabo Delgado, one of the poorest of Mozambique’s 11 provinces (Vala, 2026). Figures belonging to the Makua ethnic group, such as Sheikh Sualehe Rafayel and Abdul Carimo, played a significant role in shaping the ideology of these youths who would later organize under the umbrella of

1 It has no direct link with Al-Shabaab, another terrorist organization in Somalia.

ASWJ. Emerging gradually during the decade preceding its resort to violence in 2017, the group began developing critiques of the central government's strict secular line and the interpretation of Islam endorsed by the government-backed Islamic Council of Mozambique (*Conselho Islâmico de Moçambique: CISLAMO*) or other Islamic entities in the region, such as the Mahometan Community and the Islamic Humanitarian Association (Morier-Genoud, 2020).

Furthermore, attempting to establish an understanding of Islam closer to a Wahhabi-Salafi line rather than the prevailing Sufi interpretation of Islam in the region, members of the organization, gradually shifting toward an increasingly radical stance over time, called for the rejection of public schools and secular law, non-payment of taxes, non-participation in elections, and the withdrawal of their members' children from state schools to send them to madrasas and religious institutions established by the group itself (Sidumo et al., 2024). It is emphasized that the sermons of the Tanzanian cleric Abdul Chacur and the Kenyan cleric Aboud Rogo Mohammed, who was killed in 2012, played an important role in this ideological transformation of the group (Barnett, 2020). Starting in 2015, the closure of certain educational institutions and mosques belonging to ASWJ and the arrest or banishment of some group members, following the realization by CISLAMO, which they viewed as the mouthpiece of the central government, and the entrenched local elites that ASWJ was radicalizing, constituted one of the most critical milestones on the path to the 2017 violent action (Morier-Genoud, 2020). Gradually arming itself over time, ASWJ carried out its first major organized violent attack on October 5, 2017, by raiding three police stations in Mocímboa da Praia, a strategic port town in Cabo Delgado, thereby initiating the country's plunge once again into a spiral of violence following the civil war (Matsinhe & Valoi, 2019).

How ASWJ's institutional mechanism operates and who constitutes its decision-making and military leadership cadres remain unclear. This is because the organization exhibits a more diffuse and flexible structure where top-level leadership coexists with local, partially autonomous operational cells rather than a publicly open and rigid hierarchical chain of command (Njelezi, 2022). Abu Yasir Hassan, a Tanzanian national, stands out as a senior leader of the organization and has been designated a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) by the U.S. Department of State (Department of State, 2021). The most prominent figure in terms of commanding the organization's military operations was Bonomade Machude Omar, a Mozambican national who was killed in 2023 (ACLED, 2023a).

In the initial years of the violent activities, significant confusion existed in the literature regarding how ASWJ's activities and ideological identity should be defined. According to some accounts, ASWJ relies on Wahhabi-inspired religious thinking, which challenges the traditional and prevalent form of Islam in various respects and therefore positions the organization along a more radical line (ACLED, 2023b). According to Thomas Heyen-Dubé and Richard Rands, ASWJ does not align neatly with a global "Salafi-Jihadi" ideology in the classical sense. Rather than advocating for a global caliphate, the organization should be understood as a local challenger to the established order that emerged in response to

socioeconomic injustices and sought to increase the political and religious representation of Muslim and marginalized communities in Cabo Delgado (Heyen-Dubé & Rands, 2022). In other words, by producing religious arguments at the local level, the organization framed its mobilization around locally articulated grievances concerning social and political injustice.

The Maputo government, which refrained from defining the initial attacks as terrorism in 2017, sought assistance from the Russian-origin Wagner Group and the South African-origin Dyck Advisory Group to address the problem. However, these private military companies failed to achieve success in the conflict (Vala & Zbytovský, 2026). From this point onward, the government shifted its terminology, beginning in 2019, and portrayed the terrorist violence in Cabo Delgado as Mozambique's manifestation of external global jihadi terrorism. By leveraging the "global war on terror" narrative, which holds significant traction in global politics, this framing shifted policy attention toward transnational terrorism and facilitated the mobilization of regional and international security assistance, while potentially obscuring the conflict's local political and socioeconomic drivers.

Beginning in late 2017 and throughout 2018, the group carried out nearly 70 acts of political violence, almost all of which occurred in the Cabo Delgado region, targeting not only police officers and soldiers but also civilians. Nearly 500 people lost their lives in the conflict, including during the subsequent year, 2019 (ACLED, 2023a).

The organization, whose name was not even fully clear when it first emerged, subsequently began to make its presence more widely known and rapidly expanded its support base. In recruiting militants and establishing a suitable social base for its activities, the group turned the fact that socioeconomic conditions in Cabo Delgado were significantly worse than in the rest of the country into a major advantage (Morier-Genoud, 2020). Members of the organization asserted that they possessed an agenda aimed not only at defending their interpretation of religion but also at ending inequalities and injustices in the country. According to these claims, local political and economic elites in Cabo Delgado, predominantly Christian and ethnically Makonde and associated with the FRELIMO government, controlled the region's resources. In contrast, the group effectively assumed the role of spokesperson for the predominantly Muslim, ethnically Mwani and Makua communities living along the province's coastline, which had been largely marginalized from political and economic life (Barnett, 2020).

One of the most crucial reasons for the growth of its support base in the region was the perception that, despite the region's rich natural resources, local communities were unable to benefit adequately from this wealth (Bonate et al., 2024). The group effectively exploited for its own agenda the reality that local populations received no share of the natural gas discovered off the coast of Cabo Delgado, the associated liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects, or the ruby mines in Montepuez, alongside the forced displacement of predominantly Muslim Mwani and Makua communities as their agricultural and fishing grounds were seized (Alberdi & Barroso, 2021). The sense of relative deprivation generated

among the local population accelerated processes of radicalization among some individuals. By utilizing various economic incentives targeting unemployed youth, fishermen, and miners, ASWJ rapidly expanded its ranks of supporters and sympathizers (Faria, 2021).

In 2021, when the group conducted the highest number of attacks during its decade-long spiral of violence, the number of active fighters within its ranks reached as many as 4,000, according to some sources. From that point onward, the Maputo government began to combat ASWJ more effectively, initially with contributions from Rwanda and Tanzania and later through the SAMIM mission under SADC, reducing the number of militants to around 300 (Williams, 2025). However, as previously emphasized, the latest UN Security Council report indicates that the number of members has once again exceeded 500 (UN Security Council, 2026).

By constructing a self-sustaining criminal economy based on illegal ruby, sapphire, and gold mining around Montepuez, as well as timber trading, ivory trafficking, extortion, ransom, and bank robberies, the group attempts to increase its militant ranks by providing incentives to its supporters through this economy (Machele & Huo, 2025). Incentives such as monetary payments and even promises of marriage are reportedly provided to unemployed youth in exchange for joining the group.

The widespread sense of relative deprivation within Cabo Delgado society contributed to ASWJ's rapid expansion and to the subsequent internationalization of the conflict (Ntaka, 2023). A critical factor enabling this development was the group's pledge of allegiance to ISIS in 2019. Following this development, the organization became part of the so-called Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) (Cook, 2026). However, in 2022, terrorists affiliated with ASWJ began referring to themselves as the Islamic State Mozambique, thereby attempting to position themselves, in some sense, apart from ISCAP. The extent of operational, financial, and organizational coordination between ASWJ and ISIS remains difficult to establish, particularly with regard to military equipment and financing (Guijarro, 2025). Nevertheless, following an attack on a military post in May 2022, ISIS published a statement declaring that it now referred to ASWJ not as an affiliate of ISCAP but as a distinct Mozambican province of ISIS named "Mozambique Province" (Guijarro, 2025).

Following the elections in October 2024, the Mozambican government under the leadership of Daniel Chapo, who officially assumed the presidency in 2025, replacing Filipe Nyusi, has attempted to address the terrorism problem in the country by prioritizing military means, which had previously failed to resolve the conflict (Nhamirre, 2025).

International Interventions and the Limits of Conflict Management

The transformation of the conflict in Cabo Delgado into an increasingly international and regional security issue is a direct outcome of the Mozambican government's limited capacity to control the conflict independently. During the initial phase of the conflict, following the Mozambican military's inability to effectively counter asymmetric threats,

the Maputo government resorted to non-state private military companies rather than formal inter-state alliances. In this context, the Russian Wagner Group, deployed to the region in September 2019, suffered heavy losses due to its incompatibility with the local geographical conditions and intelligence vulnerabilities and was forced to withdraw within a relatively short period (Omerza, 2026). The South Africa-based Dyck Advisory Group, which subsequently intervened following Wagner to provide air support and training, achieved some military advances but was accused of severe human rights violations against civilian populations and failed to prevent the crisis from deepening (Hansen, 2025).

Following the failure of private military companies, the escalation of violence, and the stalling of LNG investments, official regional and bilateral military actors became involved as of July 2021. Initially deployed to the region under a bilateral agreement with Mozambique, the Rwandan military gradually increased its troop presence to more than 2,500 personnel, clearing terrorist elements from the Afungi Peninsula—where the LNG infrastructure is located—and the strategic port city of Mocímboa da Praia (Makonye & Makonye, 2026). Simultaneously, under the SAMIM mission launched within the framework of the SADC, troops from member states, primarily South Africa (approximately 1,500 soldiers), as well as Botswana, Lesotho, Tanzania, and Angola, were tasked with maintaining security in the interior regions (Arena, 2026). However, SAMIM completely withdrew from the region in July 2024 due to chronic logistical disruptions, operational coordination problems, and severe financing difficulties. Following SAMIM's withdrawal, Tanzania maintained its presence in the Nangade region with approximately 300 soldiers under a bilateral agreement aimed at protecting its own border security and energy facilities (Kum, 2026).

To strengthen the Mozambican military and support military operations financially, the EU trained rapid intervention units affiliated with the Mozambican military through the EU Training Mission in Mozambique (EUTM Mozambique), established in November 2021 and renamed the EU Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM) in September 2024. Through this mission, military expertise provided by Mozambique's former colonial power, Portugal, was consolidated under the EU framework (European Union External Action, 2026). The EU also provided €89 million in financial support to the Mozambican military, €15 million to SAMIM, and a total of €41.3 million to Rwanda's military operations through the European Peace Facility (EPF). Meanwhile, the United States designated ASWJ as a foreign terrorist organization in March 2021 and provided counterterrorism and first-aid training to the Mozambican marines.

However, these efforts and interventions have not generated sustainable stability in the country. In particular, the withdrawal of SAMIM from the region in 2024 raised significant questions regarding the sustainability of external military support and the Mozambican state's own security capacity (Opperman & Pigou, 2024). More importantly, despite increased military pressure, ASWJ's ability to expand into different regions and reorganize its activities demonstrates that the conflict is not merely a security problem that can be eliminated through military means alone. Understanding the conflict in Cabo Delgado requires taking into account factors such as poverty, social exclusion, weak state capacity,

inequality, and the political and economic marginalization of local communities. Therefore, while external military interventions serve as a necessary tool for short-term security, they cannot substitute for sustainable conflict management unless they are accompanied by efforts to address the structural conditions that reproduce the conflict (Lucey, 2026).

The Cabo Delgado experience points to the inadequacy of approaches that evaluate the success of international intervention solely on the basis of the “military degradation of armed groups”. While military interventions are vital for reestablishing state control over territory and mitigating immediate security threats to civilians, lasting stability requires that they be complemented by political dialogue, inclusive governance, local participation, socioeconomic development, and community-based conflict management mechanisms.

Conclusion:

From Military Containment to Sustainable and Inclusive Conflict Management

Although the conflict that began in Mozambique’s Cabo Delgado Province in 2017 was initially perceived as a limited local security problem, over time it transformed into a protracted and multilayered conflict with national, regional, and international dimensions. The persistence of the conflict for nearly a decade, alongside the inability to completely eradicate violence despite interventions by Mozambican security forces, as well as by Rwanda, Tanzania, the SADC, and various international actors at different periods, demonstrates that the Cabo Delgado conflict cannot be explained solely from the perspective of military capacity or counterterrorism (Chaza & Mataruse, 2025).

The emergence and continuation of the conflict in Cabo Delgado cannot be explained solely by the religious or ideological motivations of armed groups. Mozambique’s post-independence political and economic vulnerabilities, low human development, poverty, limited state capacity, and unequal distribution of resources have combined with Cabo Delgado’s historical marginalization. In addition, the economic and political exclusion of youth, the dispossession and relative deprivation experienced by local communities as a result of mega-projects based on natural resource extraction, the inadequacy of public services, and a crisis of trust between local communities and the state have strengthened the structural foundation upon which conflict could emerge. Consequently, rather than a security crisis that suddenly erupted in 2017, the conflict should be understood as the result of longer-term structural problems converging with armed mobilization at a specific juncture (Ozluk & Saide, 2025).

The presence of these structural conditions does not, of course, mean that armed violence was inevitable. What was decisive here was the mobilization of existing grievances by specific actors and their transformation into an armed struggle within an organizational and ideological framework. Therefore, an analysis of the conflict in Cabo Delgado must simultaneously consider structural conditions on the one hand and the actors mobilizing around these conditions on the other. The multidimensional approach presented in this

study leads to the conclusion that structural conditions provided fertile ground for conflict, but the nature and continuity of the conflict were shaped by the strategies of actors, state policies, and international interventions.

The analysis of international and regional interventions also supports this core argument. External intervention and other international support mechanisms curtailed ASWJ's military capacity during specific periods, contributed to the state regaining control over certain strategic areas, and prevented a broader security collapse. However, these outcomes should not be equated with sustainable conflict management. In other words, the most critical takeaway from the conflict in Cabo Delgado is that there is a significant distinction between reducing the military capabilities of an armed group and managing the conflict in a sustainable manner. Reducing an armed group's military capacity, expelling it from certain areas, or reestablishing state control over territory is insufficient to prevent the conflict from reproducing itself.

A forward-looking conflict management strategy in Cabo Delgado requires an integrated approach that does not exclude military security but situates it within a broader policy framework. First, security policies must be complemented by political inclusiveness and mechanisms for meaningful participation at the local level. Second, more inclusive mechanisms must be established for the management and distribution of natural resources that take into account the economic and political expectations of local communities. Third, policies aimed at education, employment, infrastructure, and local economic development must be viewed as complementary elements of security policy. Finally, the experiences and grievances of conflict-affected communities should be evaluated not merely as subjects of humanitarian aid policies but as primary inputs for conflict management.

Ultimately, in terms of the contemporary conflict management literature, Cabo Delgado demonstrates that military containment can be functional for short-term security, but sustainable stability requires a multidimensional approach that addresses security, governance, political inclusiveness, economic development, and the participation of local communities within the same framework. In the case of Cabo Delgado, ending the conflict will be possible not merely through the elimination of the armed group's military capacity but through the transformation of the conditions that reproduce the conflict.

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