Gas, Rubies and Jihad

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Luis Weinert



After a civil war that lasted 15 years and ended in 1992, Mozambique was considered one of the most heavily mined countries in the world. This September, Mozambique celebrates 10 years since it was declared landmine-free by the HALO Trust. The NGO is now back, not to disarm landmines, but to manage government weapon stockpiles that are increasingly fuelling a new conflict.

After decades of fragile peace in Mozambique, a new conflict has emerged, not between rivalling political factions, but between the state and Islamist insurgents. The new conflict traces its origins to a Muslim sect local to the Cabo Delgado town of Mocímboa da Praia and the surrounding area. The group going by the name Ansar al-Sunna (Arabic: أنصار

السنة, transl. 'Supporters of the Tradition') or Al-Shabaab (Arabic: الشباب, lit. 'The Youth'), initially developed as a counter-society, withdrawing from the mainstream to live under its own interpretation of sharia law. Some of its core tenets included the rejection of the secular state, its schools, and its justice system, the desire to enact sharia law, and a distinct dress code that separated the sect from the mainstream Mozambican Muslim community.

This radical form of preaching was strongly criticised by mainstream Muslim organisations, such as the Islamic Council of Mozambique (CISLAMO), as well as the state. Consequently, under increasing pressure, Al-Shabaab leaders decided to confront the state more directly, and the insurgency officially began on 5 October 2017 in a coordinated attack, targeting state security and administrative posts.

Since the initial attack, the conflict has evolved into an insurgency, constituting brutal attacks on villages and towns, security and administrative posts, and main roads, with the group staying highly mobile and operating from dense bush or forests. The group's purported aim is to establish an Islamic caliphate in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique's most northern and majority Muslim province.

Key events since:

As is usually the case, it is especially the local population of Cabo Delgado that suffers the most from the conflict. As of May 2025, the UNHCR estimates that more than 577,000 people remain displaced internally in northern Mozambique due to ongoing conflict. Between the 20th and 28th of July, at least 46,667 additional refugees joined the over 95,000 people who have fled their homes in search of safety this year alone. The insurgency primarily targets smaller villages without much protection from the state; consequently, many flee to bigger cities. However, even larger cities like Mocímboa da Praia have proven to be unsafe, as the recent attacks demonstrate. As such, as of the 26th of September, many people are attempting to leave the area, something authorities in Mocímboa da Praia are actively trying to prevent.

Cabo Delgado is one of Mozambique's poorest areas, with 50.3 % of the Region's population living under conditions of severe poverty in the year 2022/2023. This is despite the region being immensely rich in natural resources. In 2023, the region made headlines for unearthing the largest and most expensive ruby ever sold at auction. However, what is even more valuable than the $34.8 million stone sold at Sotheby's is the natural gas found along the province's coastline. While gas production is yet to ramp up in a significant manner, it is questionable how much the local population is poised to benefit from the region's resources.

Scepticism over how much of the natural resource rents will reach the population is not unfounded. Cabo Delgado, being far away from the centre of political power, the capital city of Maputo, which is in the very south of the country, results in many seeing themselves as neglected in national discourses. This perception is further strengthened by the state's limited ability

to provide public goods, resulting in what Ntaka (2023) calls a governance failure in Cabo Delgado. Problems surrounding representation extend to the 2024 elections. Frelimo won, however, two-thirds of registered voters did not cast their vote in an election that was condemned as having "irregularities during counting and unjustified alteration of election results". In the nationwide post-election violence, grievances against the government were expressed by individuals who claimed to have been evicted from their land for the purpose of mining without giving compensation that they were entitled to.

Conflict between authorities and the local population, however, goes beyond mere issues surrounding the provision of public goods or representation. In 2021, in the wake of Palma's liberation, it was widely reported that the Mozambican armed forces committed atrocities against the local population and looted the town. In this specific instance, it is reported that soldiers told locals via text to seek shelter at military facilities, set up to protect the Total gas site, upon which the arriving locals were accused of being Al-Shabaab members. It is estimated that the army killed or "disappeared" a total of 96 people.

Atrocities against the population continue until today, with a common accusation towards the army or navy being the killing of fishermen. In the latest instance, on the 8th of September, 16 fishermen were killed and their boats destroyed on Rolas Island. The army does not seem to care or understand that the communities that are living on the coast are maritime communities that depend on the ocean for their livelihood. Having travelled the area personally, getting around by boat is often the only option. In response, the population of Macímboa protested against the army, demanding their withdrawal, instead voicing their approval of Rwandan troops, whom they see as more reliable and not committing atrocities.

FRELIMO (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique, transl. Mozambique Liberation Front), the governing party of Mozambique since gaining independence from Portugal in 1975, has the exploitation of Cabo Delgado's gas fields as a central interest. Frelimo officials dream of billions of dollars from these projects for the state coffers. With one of the world's largest proven gas reserves, there is a mentality of produce it or lose it as the world aims to move away from hydrocarbons in the long term. However, currently, Mozambique receives annual gas revenues totalling $91.8 million, a relatively small figure, as most gas projects are yet to be completed or are in early stages of development. Consequently, Mozambique is immensely interested in both showing its commitment to investors and securing gas production sites to get the gas and state revenues flowing.

Currently, the situation goes as follows. Work on the Afungi Peninsula was stopped in April 2021 after insurgents captured the nearby town of Palma. Total declared force majeure, a status that remains in place. While TotalEnergies has 2,000 workers on-site preparing the base, a full restart has been repeatedly postponed. The projected start date has repeatedly

been pushed back, with resumption expected in late 2025, with gas production not expected to start before 2029.

Security remains the primary obstacle. Initially, TotalEnergies CEO Patrick Pouyanné in 2022 stated: "When I see that life is back to normal, with state services and the population, the project can restart". However, as the insurgency has intensified and strengthened in recent months, the company's position has changed dramatically. Recognising that the conflict is unlikely to end any time soon, TotalEnergies now demands the ability to convert the Afungi peninsula into a fortress. This plan involves a gas production site with no land access, and all personnel and cargo arriving by sea or air. It also requires an extension of the agreement for Rwandan forces to provide security beyond 2029. Security at the Afungi site is already being provided by Isco Segurança, a firm linked to Rwanda's ruling party.

Turning the Afungi site into a fortress presents a problem for Frelimo. Before the 2021 Palma occupation, gas contractors and staff were based in Palma town, which consequently experienced a boom in economic activity, with many businesses, such as hotels and restaurants, catering to the nearby construction site. Consequently, Total's new stipulation that all staff and contractor teams must be based inside the fortress leads to fear amongst Cabo Delgado Frelimo oligarchs that they are being shut out. In response, local businesses in Palma announced a strike. Frelimo must thus balance the current business interests of its party members with future benefits expected from gas revenues. To appease business interests, Total gave $10 million to the Integrated Development Agency (ADIN) for development initiatives in Palma and Mocimboa da Praia districts, an organisation that is controlled by senior Frelimo members.

Mozambique's northern province of Cabo Delgado has since 2017 struggled with a local insurgency dubbed "Al-Shabaab". Emerging around Mocímboa da Praia as a sect rejecting the secular Mozambican Frelimo-led state, the movement has since escalated into open conflict with the government and pledged allegiance to ISIS in 2019. Recognising that the Mozambican military was incapable of defeating the insurgency alone, an intervention by SADC and, importantly, Rwanda followed in 2021. The conflict drags on till this day, with the insurgents conducting raids into the neighbouring province of Nampula and new operations in the population centres of Macomia and Mocímboa da Praia.

As is so often the case, it is civilians who bear the brunt of the conflict: by May 2025, over 577,000 people were internally displaced, with thousands more fleeing since. This situation is exacerbated by international reductions in foreign aid, resulting in a situation where, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Mozambique's Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) was only 19 per cent funded as of July 2025.

The conflict in Cabo Delgado presents a tragic paradox. A province immensely rich in natural resources remains one of Mozambique's poor-

est, fuelling a radical Islamist insurgency born from local grievances of inequality, marginalisation, and injustice. The state's response, often brutal towards its own citizens, has only deepened this distrust and preexisting cleavages. As international energy companies plan to resume operations within a fortified enclave, the promise of shared benefits seems to fade. Ultimately, lasting peace in Cabo Delgado depends less on military victories and more on addressing these root causes of the conflict. Only through inclusive development, representation and good governance can this crisis be resolved.

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