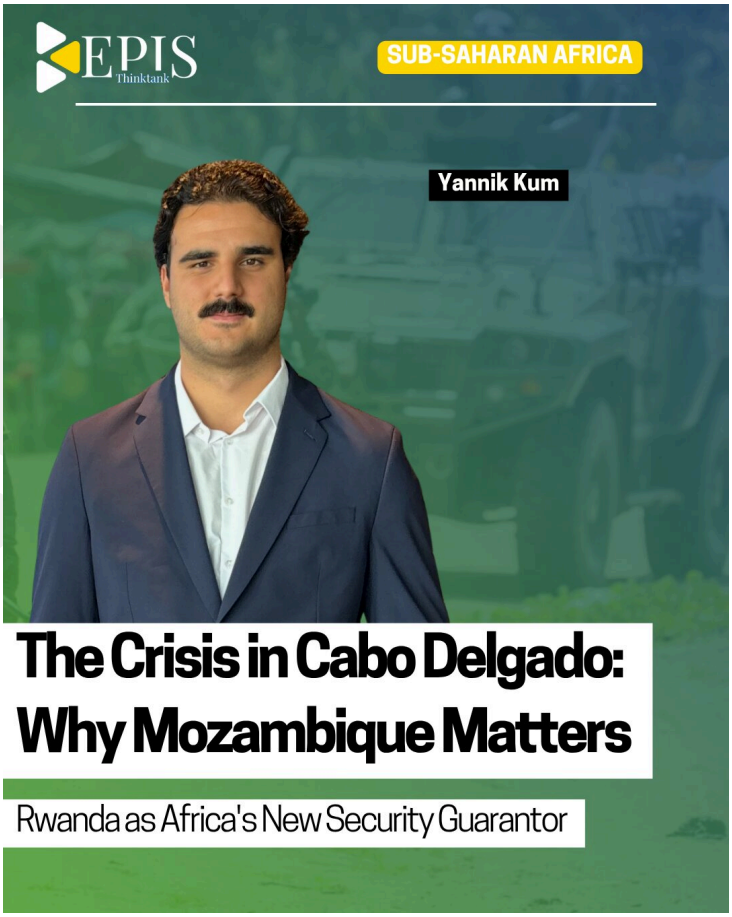
The Crisis in Cabo Delgado: Why Mozambique Matters

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Yannik Kum



The ongoing conflict in Capo Delgado and in Mozambique in general has been underreported, receiving arguably little attention within western media (Traficante, 2025; Wambui, 2025; NRC, 2024). The province of Capo Delgado is one of the poorest in the country with basic services such water, sanitation, healthcare and education only being available in limited capacity (Minoarivelo et al., 2024, p. 2). The forgotten conflict in question is the so called 'Capo Delgado Insurgency of 2017' that is still ongoing. In October 2017 the Islamist-extremist group called *Ansar al-Sunna* carried out their first terror attacks in Capo Delgado, targeting government prop-

erty and civilians (Mlambo et al., 2024, p. 299). Since the outbreak of the insurgency in October 2017, the conflict has claimed more than 6,000 lives and displaced over one million people, roughly one third of Cabo Delgado's population, of whom approximately half remain internally displaced. Violence has escalated significantly in recent months, with Cabo Delgado experiencing some of the highest levels of insecurity since the conflict began. In the first eight months of 2025 alone, more than 500 security incidents were recorded, including targeted killings, abductions, looting, and the destruction of property (Traficante, 2025). The situation only received international news and recognition after *Ansar al-Sunna* attacked a convoy of employees from Anadarko, a now-defunct United States (US) multinational oil and gas company (Neethling, 2023, p. 156).

As Mozambican security forces were unable to respond effectively, rapidly stretched beyond their operational capacity as the insurgency intensified (Bekoe et al., 2020, p. 26). In response to the deteriorating security situation and the erosion of state authority, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) launched a regional intervention mission in 2021, spearheaded by South Africa. Later that same year, Rwanda deployed its own forces to Cabo Delgado. This article focuses on the Rwandan dimension of the intervention and argues that Rwanda's intervention in Cabo Delgado marks a shift in African security politics: a small but militarily effective capable state leveraging expeditionary force to gain geopolitical capital, while Western powers externalize risk and regional organizations lose relevance.

The insurgency by Ansar al-Sunna led insurgency is the result of multiple factors. The state of Cabo Delgado is located in the far north of the country, roughly 2000km away from Maputo in a remote area of the country bordering Tanzania in the north. Islam has been prominent in the region ever since the 7th and 8th century. During the colonial period, Portuguese authorities sought to limit the influence of Islam, viewing Muslim communities as a potential threat to colonial rule. As a result, Muslims were largely excluded from the status of *assimilado*, which was closely tied to Catholicism as a marker of Portuguese identity. In northern Mozambique, colonial administrators also favoured non-Muslim groups such as the Makua over the Makonde, reinforcing existing ethno-religious divisions (Bekoe et al., 2020, p. 3). Since 1998 more fundamentalist sects have taken roots in the region (ibid. p. 4). The province saw intense fighting between Portugal and Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) during the anti-colonial struggle between 1964 and 1974 (Bonate et al., 2024, p. 10). During the liberation war, FRELIMO maintained its main operational base in Cabo Delgado, which also became a site of internal factional struggles within the movement, most notably during the 1968–1969 "struggle of the two lines." Practices such as re-education, collective punishment, and the execution of political dissidents were tested in the province and later became part of FRELIMO's post-independence governance. After independence, Cabo

Delgado remained central to the ruling party's political project, serving both as the symbolic birthplace of the liberation struggle and as a laboratory for socialist policies such as villagization, which forcibly relocated communities into communal settlements and significantly reshaped the region's social structure (Bonate et al., 2024, p. 10).

In the post-war period, growing youth frustration over inequality and political exclusion coincided with shifts within the Islamic landscape of Muslim-majority Cabo Delgado. From the late 1990s onward, Mozambican students who had studied in countries such as Egypt, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia returned to the region, contributing to the spread of Salafi influences supported by foreign funding. Over the following decade, this led to the establishment of new mosques and madrasas across northern Mozambique, including in Cabo Delgado (International Crisis Group, 2021, pp. 4–5). *Ansar al-Sunna* emerged as one of these groups (Bekoe et al., 2020, p. 5). The group promoted a strongly anti-Christian and anti-Western ideology, seeking to impose a strict interpretation of Sharia law in areas under its influence. Initially, the Mozambican government did not view the movement as a serious security threat, and its ideas gained little support among the local population, including most Muslims. Over time, however, the group increasingly relied on intimidation and violence while recruiting unemployed youth with promises of a better future under a caliphate (Neethling, 2023, p. 155). It also attempted to enforce its doctrine locally, discouraging villagers from attending schools and hospitals and pressuring worshippers in both mosques and churches to conform to its beliefs (Mutasa & Muchemwa, 2022, p. 16).

Between 2016 and 2019, Mozambique recorded 703 violent incidents, around 43 percent of which occurred in Cabo Delgado and were largely linked to attacks by *Ansar al-Sunna*. During this period, violence escalated dramatically, with fatalities rising from a single recorded death in 2016 to over 689 in 2019. Notably, between August 2017 and December 2019, approximately 74 percent of violent incidents in Cabo Delgado targeted civilians (ibid. p. 7).

Even before the insurgency began in 2017, Cabo Delgado and its population had experienced significant hardship and violence. Combined with widespread social disillusionment and the region's predominantly Muslim background, these conditions created fertile ground for the emergence of Islamist militancy. Islamist militant groups like *Ansar al-Sunna* tailored their messaging to resonate with local grievances and social tensions, and their ability to gain support depended largely on the specific social, political, and economic conditions of the communities in which they operate (Buchanan-Clarke et al., 2025, pp. 353–354), communities that suffered on the front lines of the ten year independence war and was forgotten after the independence of the new state of Mozambique.

Once the Mozambique state understood the importance to stop the insurgency after the insurgent raided the town of Olumbi, 70km northwards

of the city of Palma which serves as the main access point to the major gas development on the Afungi Peninsula that was then operated by the U.S. company Anadarko (Fabricius, 2017). Mozambique's hard security strategy, even if effectively executed, remains disconnected from a clear human security and development agenda (Pigou & Opperman, 2021, p. 11), which further increased local grievances in the population even further (International Crisis Group, 2021, p. 10). By 2019, militants had grown increasingly confident in confronting state security forces and targeting transport routes in coastal districts. On 21 February, they attacked two convoys linked to Anadarko in Palma district, killing a contractor and raising concerns within the gas industry (Reuters, 2019). Against this backdrop, the Mozambican government turned to the Russian *Wagner Group* in an attempt to curb the increasingly emboldened insurgency. *Wagner* personnel were already present in Mozambique to provide security during the 2019 elections (International Crisis Group, 2021, p. 12). However, their deployment proved ineffective, and the mercenaries ultimately failed to contain the insurgency (Rampe, 2023). Following the failure of the Wagner Group to contain the insurgency, Mozambique reluctantly agreed to a regional intervention by the SADC and Rwanda in 2021 (Makonye, 2023, p. 49). Over a three-year period, roughly 2,200 SADC troops and 1.000 supported Mozambican forces in recapturing territory from insurgents and improving security in parts of Cabo Delgado. However, the insurgency remained resilient, with a renewed wave of attacks along the province's coastline in 2024. In January 2024, SADC announced that its mission would withdraw after its mandate expires on 15 July 2024 (Arena, 2026, p. 16). At the same time as SADC troops intervened in Mozambique, approximately 1,000 Rwandan troops were also deployed. The Rwandan forces were stationed in the districts of Palma and Mocímboa da Praia, areas hosting liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects worth billions of dollars, developed by Western multinational companies such as TotalEnergies, ExxonMobil, and Eni (Nhamirre, 2024). Although both the Rwandan Defence Forces (RDF) and SADC troops operated within the same province, there was a lack of effective strategic coordination and information sharing between them, which led to several incidents of friendly fire (ebd.). Since the deployment of the RDF, the insurgency has suffered significant losses, and the operation as well as the capabilities of the RDF on the ground have been assessed by experts as "successful" (Čáslavová, 2022, p. 19).

The bilateral agreement underlying the Rwandan intervention in Mozambique has remained confidential, and the Mozambican parliament was not informed when the RDF deployed to the country, nor was it briefed on the mission's objectives, duration, or costs (Nhamirre, 2021).

The province of Cabo Delgado is home to what was, at the time, Africa's largest private investment project: a $15 billion liquefied natural gas (LNG) development led by the French energy company TotalEnergies (Burkhardt & Hill, 2020). As the insurgency worsened, so did the confidence of the oil

and gas multinationals. After acquiring Anadarko's African assets in 2019, the French energy company Total pressed the Mozambican government to sign a new memorandum of understanding that required increased security deployments around the their assets in Cabo Delgado (Zitmar News, 2020). The gas-fields in Capo Delgado are among the largest in Africa (Schaap & Werner, 2021). Since the exact details of the security arrangements remain undisclosed, it is reasonable to assume that the RDF is, at least in part, tasked with protecting gas fields in Cabo Delgado on behalf of Western and European energy companies, such as the French firm TotalEnergies. In this context, the European Union is reported to fund just under 17% of the now approximately 4,000-strong RDF expeditionary force in the region (Nhamirre et al., 2026).

The former EU high representative on foreign affairs and security policy Josep Borell named Rwanda's efforts in Capo Delgado as "The presence of the Rwanda Defence Force troops has been instrumental to make progress and remains key [...] this top-up measure is a testimony of the EU's support to 'African solutions for African problems' and, as part of the global fight against terrorism, it will also serve EU interests in the region." (Council of the EU, 2024). Furthermore, Rwanda has historically been considered a so-called "donor darling," a term used to describe countries that receive comparatively high levels of official development assistance (ODA) per capita (Desrosiers & Swedlund, 2019, p. 42). The EU's financing agreement for Rwandan troops in Cabo Delgado has been described by experts as an "old-fashioned 'Francafrique' deal: it was done mainly under pressure from France to secure TotalEnergies' gas installations in Mozambique" and that the essence of that deal has to be understood in an "transactional context" (Titeca & Kennes, 2025). This transactional logic has been repeatedly highlighted by analysts, particularly in light of simultaneous accusations by the United Nations that Rwanda is supporting the M23 rebellion in eastern DRC (Titeca, 2024).

Rwanda has increasingly used military diplomacy to enhance its international profile, with the RDF serving as a key asset. Under President Kagame, the country has actively participated in UN peacekeeping and humanitarian missions, deploying nearly 6,000 troops to operations in Mali, Darfur, and Haiti. As one of the largest contributors to UN missions globally, Rwanda has built a reputation for military professionalism, particularly in civil war and counter-insurgency contexts (Donelli, 2021). Although this strategy shifted, since 2021, Rwanda's use of military diplomacy has increasingly changed from a predominantly multilateral to a more unilateral approach. While President Kagame has maintained Rwanda's engagement in multilateral missions, he has also demonstrated a growing willingness to deploy military force independently of such frameworks (ebd.).

The deployment in Mozambique is falling in line of Kagame's model of security diplomacy as grand strategy Rwanda in form of Africa's disciplined expeditionary force. Rwanda's deployment strategy follows a broader pat-

tern in which military engagement facilitates the expansion of Rwandan-linked firms, as seen previously in the Central African Republic. In Cabo Delgado, companies connected to the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front have become involved in gas-related projects, a presence likely to grow with the resumption of LNG operations. At the same time, the intervention has strengthened Rwanda's position as a regional security provider, enhancing its diplomatic standing while diverting attention from its alleged role in the DRC (Nhamirre et al., 2026).

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