

Risk of Mass Atrocities in Mozambique

Analytic Brief – May 2021

KEY POINTS

- Mozambique ranks 24th in the [Early Warning Project](#) risk assessment for mass killing for 2020-21.
- The strongest risk factor is the armed conflict between the government and insurgents, which has killed over 1,300 civilians and displaced nearly [700,000](#) of the 2.32 million people in Cabo Delgado.
- To prevent mass atrocities, the government of Mozambique must invest in peacebuilding, provision of basic services, and professionalization of its armed services. All perpetrators of gross human rights violations must be held accountable.
- The U.S. and other governments should conduct a full mass atrocity risk assessment immediately, and analyze how their military assistance and private sector investments are impacting the conflict.

Mass atrocities are large-scale, systematic attacks against civilian populations. The Simon-Skjoldt Center focuses on situations where there is a risk of, or ongoing, genocide or other large-scale group-targeted identity-based mass atrocities. This brief uses the [State Department/USAID Atrocity Assessment Framework](#) and is a starting point for discussion and further research by governments, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Mozambique has ranked consistently high-risk for mass killing according to the [Early Warning Project](#), with escalating violence in the country's north due to an extremist insurgency. This brief outlines potential perpetrators, describes mass atrocity risk factors present and plausible worst-case scenarios, and identifies resiliencies and recommendations for preventive actions.

Mozambique experienced a 15-year civil war that killed [one million people](#), with mass atrocities committed by both the state (Mozambique Liberation Front, or FRELIMO) and the rebels (Mozambican National Resistance, or RENAMO). Low-level conflict resumed from 2013-2018, concluding in a peace agreement and elections in 2019. Meanwhile, in Mozambique's northernmost province of Cabo Delgado, a religious sect seeking radical Islamic governance formed in 2007, and shifted its focus to armed insurgency in [2015](#).

Grievances—“[claims](#) or complaints advanced by specific identity groups in society, perhaps against other groups, the state, or particular actors”—that have fueled the insurgency include a lack of justice and reconciliation after the civil war for crimes committed by the now ruling party against northern populations; the exclusion of northerners not associated with FRELIMO from

economic and political power; and accusations of state corruption, especially regarding the [mining](#) and [natural gas](#) industries. Despite northern Mozambique's vast natural resource deposits and promises that international investments would bring jobs and prosperity to the region, local populations [have not seen significant benefits](#) and in some cases have been displaced without compensation from their homes by the state and private companies.

KEY ACTORS

POTENTIAL PERPETRATORS

Ahlu-Sunnah Wa-Jama (ASWJ) is a non-state armed group operating in Cabo Delgado. ASWJ is [affiliated](#) with the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS), and the U.S. government [listed](#) it as a [foreign terrorist organization](#) in March 2021. The group has exploited economic and social grievances to recruit youth from northern Mozambique, positioning itself as an [advocate](#) of the “Muslim poor” and [countering](#) the corrupt state. ASWJ recruits mostly from the coastal Mwani, people who are primarily Muslim and have been historically marginalized by the Mozambique's dominant ethnic group, the Makonde, who are predominantly Catholic.

State security forces—both police and military—in Cabo Delgado have a history of serious [human rights violations](#). The military has

reportedly used illegal arrests, abductions, intimidation, extrajudicial executions, torture, and excessive use of force against unarmed civilians with impunity. The military and police appear to define success in terms of the number of suspected jihadists killed. This increases the risks of civilian killings, as all men and boys killed are labeled as “jihadists” regardless of actual affiliations.

State-associated militias and private security companies have been accused of killing civilians. Militias led by FRELIMO veterans of the civil war [reportedly](#) formed to combat the insurgents in late 2020. In general, state-associated militias and [private security companies](#) have less oversight and human rights training (if any) than militaries and may be more likely to target civilians. Cross-national research shows that governments sometimes “[outsource](#)” violence to militias that may use conflict to avenge localized grievances. This appears to be occurring in Cabo Delgado.

POTENTIAL TARGET GROUPS

Regardless of the perpetrator, the likely civilian targets would be [people](#) suspected of supporting the opposing side of the conflict. To date, violence in Cabo Delgado has not been organized by ethnic and religious identities; most ASWJ messaging has [portrayed the group](#) as defending or reclaiming the rights of civilians against a [corrupt and predatory state](#). However, ethnic or religious identities may become increasingly salient if armed groups need to mobilize additional support. ASWJ is more likely to target civilians of the Makonde/Catholic group who are more closely aligned with the state, and state security forces or state-aligned militias are more likely to target civilians of the Mwani/Muslim identity whom they may perceive to support ASWJ.

RISK FACTORS FOR MASS ATROCITIES

HISTORY OF MASS ATROCITIES — CIVIL WARTIME ABUSES

Countries with a history of mass atrocities are [more likely](#) to experience future mass atrocities. Unresolved grievances

from previous atrocities contribute to distrust and animosity between groups and may be used to justify future violence.

Mozambique experienced civil war from 1977 to 1992, as the South Africa-backed RENAMO insurgency fought the governing FRELIMO for control of the country. Both sides committed crimes against humanity and approximately [one million](#) people were killed. Low-level conflict between RENAMO and the FRELIMO-led state resumed in 2013 and continues to the present, but is small in scale and appears to pose minimal risk for mass atrocities.



Data from the Armed Conflict Location & Events Data Project ([ACLED](#)).

ONGOING ARMED CONFLICT — INSURGENCY IN CABO DELGADO

The strongest [predictor](#) of mass atrocities is the presence of armed conflict. In war, groups have increased capacity to commit violence, rule of law may be overlooked or suspended, and group leaders may have incentives to attack civilian populations.

Ongoing armed conflict in Cabo Delgado shows no sign of abating. As of May 1, according to according to the Armed Conflict Location & Events Data Project ([ACLED](#)), ASWJ has killed over 1,200 civilians since 2017 and attacked [infrastructure](#) and military targets primarily along the coast. ASWJ’s operations accelerated through 2020, including [mass beheadings](#) of men and boys perceived to oppose the group, and territorial expansion to inland Cabo Delgado. The state has responded by using military force against insurgents and suspected supporters, including hiring Russian and South African [mercenaries](#) and reportedly working with local militias. State security forces’ [harsh tactics](#) have killed [240](#) civilians since the conflict began. Unidentified armed groups have killed [45](#) people.

EXCLUSIONARY IDEOLOGY — ISLAMIST SEPARATISM

Exclusionary ideologies, especially when based on ethnic or religious identity, often define “in-groups” and “out-groups” that may be used to justify mass killing.

ASWJ has declared its intentions to create an IS-style state under [Sharia law](#). Conflict [can push people](#) toward ethnic or religious identities, and though violence has not been organized by ethnic and religious identities to date, as the insurgency progresses it is important to track both sides’ exploitation of identity to mobilize support or target particular groups.

LOW GOVERNMENT CAPACITY — INABILITY TO PROVIDE SECURITY

Quantitative research suggests that countries with lower government capacity are more likely to experience mass killings. States with fewer resources are less capable of combating insurgencies and less able to distinguish rebels from civilians in their own targeting.

By [virtually any measure](#), the Mozambican government has relatively low capacity. The military’s limited size and budget precludes [complex operations](#) and “security forces are [not trained](#) in counter-extremist operations and lack the discipline, equipment, and intelligence information to effectively counter ASWJ alone.” Despite four years of military and police-led counterinsurgency efforts, civilians have only seen an [increase in violence](#).

CRITICAL UNCERTAINTIES & FUTURE RISKS

WILL THE INSURGENCY EXPAND WESTWARD?

As ASWJ moves westward into Cabo Delgado’s central districts, attacks on civilians have increased. ASWJ members share fewer cultural, ethnic, and religious characteristics with civilians inland, increasing the potential for “othering” and identifying civilian groups as the enemy. ASWJ could choose to target civilians to intimidate them into submission, as punishment for local militias attempting to counter ASWJ dominance, or, in a worst-case scenario ASWJ may determine that eliminating civilians who do not ascribe to its

beliefs and accept its governance is the best path to victory.

Additionally, if ASWJ continues to increase its territorial control, the state will likely increase efforts to counter the group, which may result in further state-led attacks on civilians perceived to support the insurgents. State forces may be stretched thinner and rely on non-state militias, which may commit more abuses against civilians themselves. The rise of state-associated militias opposing ASWJ may in turn result in ASWJ targeting civilians who share identity characteristics with the militias.

WILL FOREIGN MILITARY ASSISTANCE INCREASE?

As of [May 2021](#), the U.S., Portugal, the [Southern African Development Community](#) (SADC), and Rwanda have sent training and/or military support missions to Cabo Delgado. The European Union and France are considering engaging as well. This increase in foreign presence may lead a threatened ASWJ to escalate its operations, fuel recruitment, and [bolster support](#) from foreign jihadist groups rallying against “Western” interference. If ASWJ feels increasingly under threat, its calculations of the value of large-scale civilian targeting may shift. Alternatively, increased foreign military assistance, especially if it includes rigorous human rights training, monitoring, and reporting mechanisms, could lead to more effective and targeted counterinsurgency operations and thereby decrease overall risk to civilians.

WILL THE STATE ABANDON ITS MILITARIZED STRATEGY?

To date, the Mozambican government’s counterinsurgency efforts have been entirely through military and police actions. If the government enacts a more comprehensive peacebuilding program and commits to basic service provision, including addressing underlying grievances and the urgent [needs](#) of the [almost 700,000](#) people currently displaced, it may win over more civilian support and the conflict could de-escalate.

SOCIAL & INSTITUTIONAL RESILIENCIES¹

Religious leaders at the provincial, national, and international levels have condemned the use of violence and called for religious [tolerance](#). Pope Francis [visited](#) Mozambique in September 2019, and brought increased international attention to the conflict and humanitarian crisis by naming Cabo Delgado as a place of concern in his 2019 Easter address. Though Cabo Delgado’s coastal areas are majority Muslim, most districts in Cabo Delgado are [split](#) between Muslims and Catholics.

Nationally, there is **political incentive** to end the conflict. The ruling party, FRELIMO, would benefit politically from demonstrating its ability to resolve the conflict. For this factor to be a resiliency, however, the government must apply a comprehensive approach to conflict resolution rather than continuing to pursue militarized solutions.

Cabo Delgado’s economy is based on agriculture, forestry, gem mining, and offshore natural gas extraction. The domestic and international **private sector**, including natural gas companies Total, ENI, and ExxonMobil, have significant interest in rebuilding stability to continue their operations in northern Mozambique.

CONCLUSION

This brief analysis, together with the statistical finding that ranks Mozambique 24th in the world at risk of new mass killing, strongly suggests that urgent action is needed to prevent the escalation of violence against civilians. To prevent mass atrocities in Mozambique:

- All armed groups—state and nonstate—operating in Cabo Delgado should refrain from attacking civilians and take steps to ensure the protection of civilians in the course of their operations.

- The Mozambican government and international community should press for documentation, investigation, and prosecution of crimes committed by individuals in the state security forces, state associated militias, and ASWJ.
- The Mozambican government should expand its counterinsurgency efforts to address long-standing grievances and ensure the conflict reaches a durable resolution.
- Training and military support to state forces should be conducted in accordance with human rights and civilian protection principles and vetting procedures. If there are reports of civilian harm, support should be halted immediately and investigations conducted.
- Community leaders should use their platforms to call for ethnic, religious and social tolerance and cohesion in order to strengthen resiliencies and prevent any future divisions or targeting.
- Donor governments and the private sector should analyze their roles, investments, and assistance streams in the conflict to ensure they are not exacerbating current violence or risk.
- Embassies committed to preventing mass atrocities should jointly track weekly risk indicators and consider joint policy actions when specific risks to civilians escalate. Indicators are best formed by first conducting field-level atrocity risk assessments.

AUTHOR

Mollie Zapata is the Research Manager at the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide.

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¹ Resiliencies [are](#) “relationships, structures or processes that are able to provide dispute resolution and meet basic

needs through non-violent means” and may be supported or expanded to counterbalance the risk of violence.