SUMMARY
The unrest in Northern Mozambique surrounding the expansion of the Islamic State Central African Province (ISCAP) affiliated militant group Ansar al-Sunna, has generated rising humanitarian needs. Several hundred thousand people have become food insecure as the conflict and associated displacement has interrupted agricultural processes. Insecurity, administrative challenges and climatic shocks have hindered aid access.

This document reviews some of the key operational security questions for aid agencies to assist security risk management to support aid access.

CONTEXT
Since the start of May 2021, the area around the town of Palma has remained volatile, with sporadic clashes reported by local media, despite claims by the Mozambique government that the area remains secure.

As a result of the attack on Palma in March, subcontractors have started to dismantle the infrastructure left behind by Total at their Afungi site (27km south of Palma) after it suspended operations and ordered the evacuation of its staff from the region.

At least 20,000 IDPs are living near the Total gas project in Afungi with limited access to humanitarian aid, or the ability to leave the area, as the Mozambique government controls all access routes.

Regional leaders met Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi in Maputo on 27 May to try to persuade him to allow a Southern African Development Community (SADC) force to tackle Ansar al-Sunna. However, whilst they agreed to work with Mozambique to support their efforts, there was no mention of military support, due to President Nyusi’s concern over perceived foreign intervention within the country. Instead, the SADC planned to enhance border security measures and target terrorist finance.

The European Union is also offering to support the government with a military training team (possibly up to 300 soldiers) to reinforce the 60 Portuguese soldiers who deployed to the country in May on a four month mission to train the Mozambique military in counter-insurgency techniques. This is in addition to the US Special Forces (Green Berets) who are also carrying out military training.

THE INSURGENTS
The Cabo Delgado insurgents are generally homegrown, motivated by local grievances, many of whom have since joined the IS brand and adopted IS philosophy. They are also opportunistic by nature and adapt to what fits their aim, generally attacking those who they disagree with. Many are splinter groups, only loosely connected to even local command structures.
The militants will change their tactics either as a result of pressure on them, significant success by them or external help or guidance from IS. If either of the latter two applies, then larger ‘out-of-area’ spectaculars are certainly possible. Aid work is and always has been seen by IS and other jihadist groups as an unwanted external intervention, though in the past six months Ansar al-Sunna has not specifically attacked aid organisations - this includes the attack against Palma. NGOs may still be vulnerable based on the nature of their programmes - see the following sections on Risks to Aid Agencies.

Pemba is situated further south in Cabo Delgado than most of the insurgent activity, and is connected by the N1 main road to the south of Mozambique. UN organisations such as WFP, UNHCR and UNICEF work out of Pemba, and have been able to access the surrounding area. There is a possibility that Ansar al-Sunna will aspire to attack Pemba within the next year. However, it is more likely that they will attempt smaller scale operations at specific targets, for example government installations or infrastructure such as police checkpoints or military outposts.

There is also the likelihood of a small scale maritime attack – in particular against government / military infrastructure or installations. To attempt a major operation to take over Pemba, as happened in Mocimboa de Praia, would involve high level planning and strategy, so this is certainly unlikely in the short term (the next three months).

If the government continues either solely on their own efforts or using Private Military Companies (PMCs) such as Wagner or the Dyck Group, a concentrated attack against Pemba is likely, leading to parts of it being captured by the group. We recommend coordination with the UN / or INGO coordination groups in the area especially in the countryside around Palma, and on the outskirts of Pemba. The Mozambique army may have some oversight of the main roads. However, this can be erratic and may carry security risks on their own.

The IOM noted that the number of IDPs near Pemba had increased by 30 per cent since the attack on Palma, though numbers are still unconfirmed. Many remain in forest areas near Palma, with 23,000 around Afungi / Quitanda village. There have been no major incidents reported from Pemba itself, despite the presence of UN agencies. Although the instability brought to the town as a result of the influx of refugees may increase.

There are rumours that militants have moved south disguised as IDPs, towards Pemba. There has been one report from a local new site reporting on 03 May 2021, that an on Makaloe island, Cabo Delgado a group of IDPs en route from Palma to Pemba by sea, were stopped by insurgent fighters pretending to be displaced people. They were taken to Pangane, where about 40 escaped.
However, if the militants change tactics, they may seek to travel down to other towns outside of their main area of operation, though government offices would be at a higher risk than NGO offices. This was the style of attacks of ISIS in Africa in the past (Algiers UN, Kenya, US etc.). This could even result in targeted bomb attacks in cities such as the capital Maputo.

There is evidence that Ansar al-Sunna uses kidnap for ransom to raise funds for weapons. Religious groups and businesspeople have been targeted in the past. Although its actual worth is unknown, ransoms range from between $3,000 to $35,000. Two nuns held captive were ransomed for $25,000 and released last year. Ansar al-Sunna has also kidnapped several Indian nationals (of which two were ransomed recently for $35,000).

Further kidnapings, especially in Maputo, have been recorded recently, pointing to Ansar al-Sunna seeking to exchange further captives for ransom money. **There is an increasing risk that aid workers may also be seen as a target and aid agencies need to ensure strong mitigation measures.**

There are reports that Ansar al-Sunna has been using vessels to threaten towns along the coastline, following their capture of the Port of Mocimboa de Praia in August 2020. Indeed, the incident box below confirms that militia groups have been assaulting IDP boats near to the coast, whilst last year they successfully launched an operation across the River Ruvuma into Tanzania, killing several people.

**RISKS TO AID AGENCIES**

- The attacks in Palma were targeted at both forcing out Total (to pressure the government economically), and to gain supplies.
- The extent NGOs may be at risk of a targeted attack when operating in areas where militants are active will depend on how their programmes and organisations are perceived by the local militant commander.
- Threats and risk differ between aid organisations and programmes.

**May 2021:** Near Mucungwe island, Macomia district, Cabo Delgado province, two IDP boats were fired at by an Islamist militia, killing seven on board.

**May 2021:** Near Makolowe island, close to Pemba city, Cabo Delgado province, four IDPs boats fleeing Palma were captured by an Islamist militia along with six other fishing vessels. The number of IDPs abducted is unknown.

French President Emmanuel Macron has said that France could contribute to maritime operations in the area, as France has naval vessels in the region operating from French Reunion. This would only be implemented if approved by Mozambique and SADC.

Vigil InSight noted the limited use of IEDs in Cabo Delgado and infrequent use of machetes by tribal units. By contrast, the militias - who are the main instigators of violence - are heavily armed, having secured stocks of firearms both left over from the country’s previous conflicts as well as taken from security force bases that they have overrun. Furthermore, units that are affiliated to IS already have external help from other IS affiliates.

**March 2020:** A civilian pick-up truck of an INGO vendor was attacked by a group of 10-12 armed men near the Nangororo village, Meluco District, Cabo Delgado. The vendor and his driver managed to escape, however the vehicle had to stop because of the damage. The vendor sustained two bullet wounds and was hospitalised.
EDUCATION PROJECTS

- Education can be an ideological target related to language used in education (which European or national language), the curriculum (secular or religious) or who has access to education (girls).
- Education can also be targeted for opportunistic convenience reasons when schools provide soft targets to take a large group of unarmed, young people hostage.
- Schools and universities may also be used as a source for recruitment of combatants.
- In 2020, at least 10 schools were attacked and set on fire in Cabo Delgado province.
- 57% of these incidents occurred in the context of attacks on civilians in which multiple buildings, including the school, were burned down.

Insecurity Insight’s report “Threats and violence against education in Mozambique in 2020” highlights the increase in attacks against education and teachers from two in 2019 to ten in 2020. Most incidents were reported in the first six months of 2020.

FOOD/AGRICULTURAL PROJECTS

- Food projects are often targeted for practical reasons but some attacks have an ideological underpinning. Food security projects are particularly vulnerable to fraud and corruption or political exploitation.
- Militias / IS will attack and loot if they require food sources. In the context of severe food shortages, risks of looting, or diversion of food is high.
- Some militants have opposed food supplies delivered claiming that they are harmful to local people.
- There are risks of attacks if militants feel the project will increase tensions within the local community or goes against IS philosophy: for example, female focused income generating projects could be targeted.
- Militants may attack to extort cash from farmers or to deny supplies to the local security forces or foreign investors (e.g. Total)
- Food distributions may result in violence.

March 2021: In Palma town, Cabo Delgado province, beneficiaries were injured during a food distribution when Mozambican Defense and Security Forces (FDS) members opened fire on the crowd.

The beneficiaries claimed the officers distributing food - who were allocated by the government in partnership with WFP - were prioritising their families and acquaintances, while demanding payment for medical supplies. The food distribution was suspended.
**HEALTH PROJECTS**

- Health programmes may be attacked to gain access to health care (kidnapping of health workers or looting of drugs). An increase in security operations in the area that injure militants may lead to higher trauma care needs for militants. Communicable disease outbreaks can heighten the risk of theft of drugs.

- Maternity and infant health: in ethnic centred conflicts some militants may target maternity or infant care as an attack on a specific ethnic group.

- Family planning: can be an ideological target.

- Until now, there have not been reported cases of militant attacks that targeted health care out of an ideological opposition to any health programme.

- At least nine health facilities in Cabo Delgado province were set on fire by non-state armed groups, including Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaa (ASWJ) in 2020. No such attacks on health care have so far been reported in 2021.

- Seven health facilities were damaged in the context of attacks on villages in which schools, shops, churches and other community buildings were burned down along with private homes.

**GOVERNMENT RESPONSE**

- Concerns have remained over the recent security response by the FDS following the attack on Palma. The response continues to remain piecemeal with Ansar al-Sunna remaining firmly embedded in the area, and limited clarity overall as to how the Mozambique government or armed forces will look to quell the current spread of the Islamic militant group.

- Although the EU is offering to send a mission to train the FDS, this again remains on hold whilst the government decides whether to accept their aid. The limited support from both the Portuguese and US military (see Summary above), and the increasingly narrow efforts from both the Wagner and Dyck Group PMCs mean that the Mozambique army will not be able to attempt a full scale military offensive against Ansar al-Sunna unless the PMCs change their operating procedures to use heavier air support.

- Our trend analysis in the March Vigil Insight report pointed to a decrease in the early months of 2021 in insurgent attacks. However, since then, there has been an increase in clashes with three alone against Palma in the period between 22 - 31 May. It is therefore likely that the current FDS efforts will remain piecemeal, due to finite resources, leading to a likely escalation in ISCAP incursions.

- President Nyusi and his government remain concerned that any major international support, including from the SADC, will be perceived as a form of foreign intervention, preferring instead the approach of using Mozambique troops against militant groups, backed up by support from other countries via military training.

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Insecurity Insight’s report “Threats and violence against health care in Mozambique” highlights the increase in attacks against health projects and workers.

In 2020 alone, 57% of health facilities for workers were harmed during attacks against civilians suggesting at most attacks on health care seek to target the community.
Civilian casualties will also remain a concern. The Vigil Insight March report included Amnesty International’s report that the Dyck Advisory Group had been accused of firing indiscriminately against civilians. Moreover, the actions of a PMC is not as impactful in the short term as that of a foreign military.

In addition, unwelcome activity by foreign militaries might jeopardise trade deals. Any international military intervention would also be seen as emphasizing ISCAP’s claim that they are acting against “infidels”. The government is therefore unlikely to take up South Africa’s reported offer of 3,000 troops at present. However, the offer of the EU’s extended military support at the end of the year is likely to be approved, as well as offers of military financial aid from either SADC, the US or the EU.

Government involvement in trafficking has been well documented with analysts noting this as another reason behind the reluctance of the Mozambique authorities to allow international military intervention. This seems very possible.

Drug trafficking into Mozambique by drug syndicates (including from Brazil and Afghanistan) has been ongoing for at least two decades, and other forms of trafficking - wildlife, gems (Mozambique is known for its rubies), timber and humans have been ongoing for some time. The army is also very likely to be involved in other forms of illicit financial enterprises in Northern Mozambique, both small scale and large. However, there are few studies into the depth of its involvement due to high level government association with trafficking and the need to protect illicit finances.

**PREDICTIONS**

For now, the Mozambique government will continue to use piecemeal international military training to bolster efforts against ISCAP and other militant groups in the north, preferring to use the FDS and PMCs against such groups.

External military assistance – particularly from Western states - could further increase racialization of marginalized Muslim communities unless it is coupled with significant and effective development and job creation programmes.

This continued action against the ongoing militancy means that it has the potential to expand towards Nangade on the Tanzanian border and south towards Pemba, fuelled by financial and physical resources taken during the conflict so far, and by suspected growing links between Ansar al-Sunna and drug smuggling cartels (see section on trafficking).

Trafficking of gems, timber and humans will continue, with the drug trade seeing an exponential rise, as links with international cartels from Brazil and Afghanistan grow through links with both the authorities (government and FDS) and with ISCAP.

**MITIGATIONS**

Coordination with the UN / or INGO coordination groups in the area especially in the countryside around Palma, and on the outskirts of Pemba.

Ensure that communications with HQ are robust and have an alternative means of communications in case of being stopped and drawn into an incident that may deteriorate.

Emphasize Standard Operating Procedures - including frequent situational reports to HQ.

NB which main routes appear to have some oversight by the Mozambique army, especially as these will be erratic and therefore may carry security risks.

Where possible note militia-controlled routes and checkpoints. Avoid where possible or take alternative route.