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## **The jihadi insurgency in Mozambique: origins, nature and beginning**

Eric Morier-Genoud

Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, United Kingdom

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*In memory of Abdul Raufu Mustapha*

For the last three years, the province of Cabo Delgado in northern Mozambique has faced an insurgency. It began in October 2017 when insurgents occupied the town of Mocímboa da Praia for 48 h and stole armament, only fleeing to the bush when police reinforcements arrived. Since then, the insurgency has grown into a typical guerrilla war. At first, attacks took place at night, against small villages. In 2018, insurgents began to make assaults during the day. In 2019, they began to target small towns, army outposts and transport on roads. By early 2020, they had overrun district capitals and circulated videos articulating a clear jihadi agenda. In July 2019, they had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, more commonly known as ISIS). With this, ISIS began to take responsibility for more and more of the attacks in Mozambique. The government reacted by sending troops to the north of the country, securing towns and villages, and hunting insurgents. While it did not manage to end the insurgency, it has managed to contain it to a geographical area covering about half of the province (around 30,000 square kilometres). As the insurgency gains in strength and confidence, many wonder what is coming next. This requires that we understand who the insurgents are and what they want.

There is much debate about the causes, origins and nature of the insurgency in Mozambique. A first dimension of the debate relates to the religious nature of the conflict. Various commentators and authors, such as Hanlon, argue that the cause of the conflict is material deprivation, particularly poverty, marginalization and lack of perspectives among the youth, with religion functioning only as 'rallying point' or cloak.<sup>1</sup> These authors highlight that Cabo Delgado is one of Mozambique's poorest provinces and one of the areas where megadiscoveries of gas have created unmet expectations as international companies are still in the process of building an LNG (natural gas) industry in the area. Other authors, such as Habibe, Forquilha and Salvador, argue the opposite, namely that Islam is a key factor, if not the central factor, behind the insurgency. They posit that young Muslims in Mozambique have been radicalized under the influence of preachers from Kenya and Tanzania.<sup>2</sup> Some point more widely to Wahhabism and

the Mozambican students who studied at Saudi Arabian, Egyptian and Sudanese universities.<sup>3</sup> A second dimension of the debate relates to gauging the external nature of the insurgency. Many authors see it as originating from inside Mozambique, some arguing, as we have seen, it relates to local poverty, inequality and marginalization.

Others argue, however, that it either came from the outside or is the result of a foreign influence. The International Crisis Group, following the UN Monitoring Group, makes the case for an external origin in that it sees the insurgency as the work of Kenyan militants who, repressed by the government of Tanzania where they had taken refuge, fled to Mozambique.<sup>4</sup> Matsinhe and Valoi, in turn, argue only for an external influence when reporting an interviewee saying that jihadist thinking was 'imported' from abroad; similarly, Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira point to ideological influences by foreign preachers, such as by Sheik Abu Rogo.<sup>5</sup> In the face of these divergent arguments and approaches, the research for this article began from the premise that we need to know who the insurgents are, where they come from, and what they say they want to achieve before we can engage in any discussion of the religious or the foreign nature of their actions. To achieve this, I began research with the first attack on 5 October 2017 to identify who was involved.

The perspective of this paper is historical and sociological, aiming at analysing, as Mustapha put it, 'the internal dynamics and historicity of African Muslim societies'.<sup>6</sup> Following Chome, the text also gives due consideration to the ideas of insurgents and the evolution of their thinking on Islam and politics.<sup>7</sup> Research was conducted during two stints of fieldwork in Cabo Delgado in 2018 and 2019. With the help of local research assistants, I collected over 50 interviews with Muslims leaders, state officials, NGO workers, people affected by the insurgency, and two former insurgents. Different actors and government officials involved in Cabo Delgado also shared materials. In view of the sensitivity of the situation, I decided to anonymize all names of interviewees and interviewees, and the locations and dates of the interviews. On the bases of that research, the article is organized into three sections. The first looks at the very beginning of the insurgency and the nature of the group behind it. The second investigates the origin of the insurgents' group while the third explores why the so-called Al-Shabaab group shifted to armed violence after years of relatively peaceful existence, and what internationalization it underwent since. It argues that behind the insurgency lies a religious sect, one that began in 2007 and that shifted from Islamism to violent jihadism in the mid-2010s.

## **Nature of the insurgency in Cabo Delgado.**

The first attack in Cabo Delgado took place on 5 October 2017 in the town of Mocímboa da Praia. Journalists' reports, interviews, images, and videos all suggest that most insurgents were from the town of Mocímboa da Praia itself. The majority had grown up there, some were from other districts of Cabo Delgado and a few had 'foreign accents', but most of them had been living in the town before the attack. Many local people recognized the attackers and reported that they belonged to what they called the 'Al-Shabaab' religious sect. According to these accounts, the sect had a mosque in the town's Nanduadua neighbourhood and was in the process of building another new mosque next to the first one. For a number of days after the

attack, the police tried to deny this, but then destroyed the mosque as well as buildings associated with the sect in other towns. Some lower-level state officials also made private and public claims confirming that a religious sect was behind the attack, just as did members and lower officials of religious institutions. The head of the Islamic Council in Mocímboa da Praia explained, for example, that ‘the presence of individuals with ideologies of a radical tendency has been noticed in recent times and had been reported to the authorities’.<sup>8</sup> The administrator of Mocímboa declared similarly that ‘Some of them [attackers] are our children from various neighbourhoods and villages. It is a mixture of citizen who got involved in this confusion’.<sup>9</sup> The newspaper *O País* (which sent journalists on 6 October) wrote on 9 October that ‘the truth is that all the residents of this town have absolutely no doubt that the attacks were carried out by members of the Al-Shabaab sect’.<sup>10</sup>

If there was no doubt locally as to who was behind the attacks of 5 October 2017, there was some disagreement over the name of the sect behind the insurgents. Some thought it was called Al-Shabaab and others called it Al-Sunnah Wal-Jamâa. A few journalists reported the name Swahili Sunnah, a term used by the influential independent newsheet *mediaFAX* (Maputo) and the weekly newspaper *Savana* (Maputo). But I was unable to confirm this name on the ground and the scholars Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira, who did extensive research on the insurgents in Mocímboa da Praia, do not even mention the term.<sup>11</sup> The population on the ground used Al-Shabaab to refer to the sect. It means ‘youth’ in Arabic (most sect members are young, locals explain) and the men behaved like the Al-Shabaab organization in Somalia, i.e. forcefully. Today this is the most popular name for the insurgency, in Cabo Delgado and nationally, among the population and in newspapers, on TV and in other media. It is also the name the insurgents have been using themselves in written notes in early 2020. As to the term Al-Sunnah Wal-Jamâa, researchers Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira posit that it is a name the sect tried to appropriate because it means ‘adepts of the prophetic tradition and the consensus’, which is the term the mainstream Muslim majority gives itself in Cabo Delgado (and elsewhere).<sup>12</sup> In other words, the insurgents tried to use the term Al-Sunnah Wal-Jamâa to present themselves as the legitimate holders of religious orthodoxy. This failed, however, because Muslim leaders and the population rejected their use of the term and instead called the sect Al-Shabaab – a term the insurgents eventually re-appropriated.<sup>13</sup>

What did the insurgents and their sect intend with their attack on 5 October 2017? Contrary to what the national police spokesperson claimed in subsequent days, they did not attack people indiscriminately with the aim of ‘sowing fear and terror to the population and installing public disorder’.<sup>14</sup> Rather, they were very selective and purposeful in their attacks. A citizen reported to a journalist that he came across the leader of the Al-Shabaab sect and four armed men as he and some friends were walking to the mosque at 5:00AM on the morning of the attack. The leader told the prayer-goers that they did not constitute his target as he and his armed men were only going after the state’s armed forces; they would not attack civilians unless the latter denounced them to the police.<sup>15</sup> Another Mocímboa resident explained: ‘They had a machete, a knife and a machine gun and one told me not to be afraid because they were only after the police’.<sup>16</sup> An old woman encountered the insurgents early in the morning too, upon which they instructed her to go back into her house.<sup>17</sup> A district administrator confirmed this approach in an interview in 2018: On 5 October, they focused on the police force. They were not preoccupied with civilians,

else it would have been serious. They tried to weaken the position [of the armed forces] in the town, but thanks to the help we received, we rapidly managed to chase them away.<sup>18</sup> Many Mocímboa inhabitants explained that the insurgents and their sect rejected the secular state and wanted to introduce sharia rule. The administrator of the district of Palma (also affected by the nascent insurgency) said that it was a ‘group which fights against the government or lawfulness, they do not want children to study and they enter mosques with their shoes’.<sup>19</sup> A resident of Nanduadua explained further:

If I were to have problems with my wife, then I should not go to the police station, it has to be to these *monhés* [sic]<sup>20</sup> of marriage issues, not the [police] station. [If there is] a problem with crime, one should not go to the police, one should use Islamic law. That is what they wanted. They demanded that the statues of Samora Machel and Eduardo Mondlane be removed in town as well as the Christian crosses at the entrance of town, because this is an area dominated by Muslims and there should be no Christian symbols.<sup>21</sup>

Journalist Lázaro Mabunda, who did research on this group before October 2017, wrote in a similar vein a few days after the first attack: They do not accept that children go to school because to them the only acceptable school is the Muslim one. There is no other [school] they accept. They do not recognize state schools. Their food habits have to be in line with what they believe too. Besides, the group says there is only one Supreme Being on earth: Allah, and no one else.<sup>22</sup>

The interviews conducted during the course of the present research in 2018 and 2019 confirmed these elements and revealed more characteristics about the sect. Members had a distinctive dress code: women had to wear the *burqa*<sup>23</sup> while men wore shortened trousers, a scarf around their (shaved) head, a beard, and a knife. This dress code was worn by many of the men caught or killed, photographed or filmed, on 5 October 2017. Concerning prayer, the sect saw men praying with arms folded across their chests, not wearing the *cofió* (kufi cap), keeping on their shoes inside the mosque, and praying only three times a day instead of the usual five times a day for Sunni Muslims. The prayer element seems to indicate the sect is scripturalist and, more specifically yet, *Quranist*.<sup>24</sup> The group forbid women to do any work outside the home, including agricultural work (traditionally done by women). They denounced the existing political and religious order as corrupt, and pronounced all those involved in these structures as kaffir (infidels). They refused to greet, or respond to greetings from, people they considered infidels and did not hesitate denouncing such people in public, particularly those who worked for the state administration. An Islamic teacher declared in an interview:

They had attitudes and gestures that were foreign to our religion, for example the prohibition of children to study in schools, the prohibition to vote, marriages which did not follow the law, teachings in which they recommended to insult misbelievers and not respect parents, the government, and [other] religious leaders.<sup>25</sup>

We can draw two elements from this description. First, these men identified as Islamists, that is to say individuals who reject the secular state and want to apply sharia rule in full.<sup>26</sup> Thus, they did not simply follow Islamic religious principles but wanted to establish a sharia-based political order. As Tibi puts it: ‘Islamism is not Islam’, even if the two are connected. Islam is a religion

while Islamism is a political ideology, a form of ‘religionized politics’, aiming at establishing a sharia-based political order.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, these individuals constituted a religious sect. Instead of trying to change the political order, they withdrew from it, and cut themselves off from society, so as to apply sharia rule for themselves. They demanded that their members not engage with the secular systems of justice, health and education; instead, they offered these services within their mosques, thus developing a ‘counter-society’. By definition, sects are newly formed religious groups that protest elements of their parent religion and society. They operate in high tension with these, denouncing them as ‘corrupt’, while claiming to represent a return to the ‘true religion’.<sup>28</sup> The group we know as Al-Shabaab in Mozambique meets this definition of a sect. It was an Islamist sect until 2017, when it decided to stop withdrawing from society and went on the attack in order to change society.

Tellingly, the state and most Muslim leaders in Cabo Delgado understood Al-Shabaab as a ‘sect’ before 2017. They referred to it in those terms and described it with the very characteristics just listed. Most exhaustively and tellingly, mainstream Islamic leaders discussed Al-Shabaab at their national Islamic Conference held in Nampula on 10–13 November 2016. The leaders, mostly from the Islamic Council of Mozambique (CISLAMO),<sup>29</sup> discussed three themes, one of which was ‘emergent sects’ in the country. Their focus lay on Shia Muslims and the ‘Al Shabab’ (sic) whose presence they discussed in relation to the north-eastern provinces of Zambezia, Nampula and Cabo Delgado. Shia Muslims were considered a problem in all three provinces, Al-Shabaab only in Cabo Delgado. In a presentation on Cabo Delgado, the following points were made about Al-Shabaab:

- They discourage formal education in public institutions (school, university, etc.);
- They do not respect Islamic principles;
- They allow weddings without consent from the girl’s parents;
- They carry knives, which symbolize jihad;
- They do not accept dialogue;
- They incite violence and dissatisfaction against the teachers of ISLAM;
- [They promise] attacks against the Ahle Sunnat Wal Jammāt [sic].<sup>30</sup>

This is congruent with the descriptions given by Mocímboa residents and with details uncovered by my own research. In sum, it is clear that the men who attacked Mocímboa da Praia in October 2017 were from an Islamist sect present in Cabo Delgado only and known as Al-Shabaab. The sect existed before 2017 and Muslim leaders and others had already discussed its existence, and what should be done about it, before it began to engage in armed violence. I now turn to consider the next question: where the sect came from.

## **Origins of the Al-Shabaab sect**

Our investigations in the south of the province of Cabo Delgado suggests that the sect emerged in the district of Balama (See Map below) in 2007, though it could have begun earlier and in a different district. A Muslim leader reported that a similar movement had appeared in 1989–90 in

Nangade district. The adepts of that sect claimed to be followers of Moises, a prophet in the Muslim tradition. They had a dress code similar to that of the members of the present-day Al-Shabaab. The sheik explained: ‘They were young, they cut their trousers, they cut their hair, [they wore] a beard, and [they walked with a] wooden stick. In the mosque, they prayed woman, man, woman, man...’.<sup>31</sup> This description reveals that the Nangade group had unusual views and practices, several of which correspond to those of Al-Shabaab – haircut, beard, short trousers, and a different way of praying in the mosque. At the time, mainstream Islamic organizations in Cabo Delgado considered the group as a risk and in 1990 the sheik interviewed was tasked with going to Nangade to help the administrator ‘contain’ the religious group. They talked to some members of the sect and arrested others. Eventually, ‘by force, the group faded’, the sheik explained. Because the Nangade group acted similarly to the contemporary Al-Shabaab, the sheik speculated that the members of the 1989–90 group could be the same as those of the sect today, though he could not point to any specific element that would prove a direct relationship between them.<sup>32</sup> More research will be needed on this point. In the meantime, we can conclude that either (a) the sect is quite old and/or has connection with an older sect, or (b) we need to think of the Al-Shabaab sect as part of a broader dynamic and history of Islamic sects in Cabo Delgado.<sup>33</sup>

Concerning the Al-Shabaab sect, our research from 2018–19 uncovered its earliest manifestation in 2007 in the district of Balama. In that year, a young man, Sualehe Rafayel, of Makua ethnicity, returned to his birth village of Nhacole (a.k.a. Muapé – see Map below) after having spent several years in Tanzania. He joined the local Wahhabi mosque, recently built by the Africa Muslim Agency (AMA, a Kuwaiti NGO). He had a different approach to the Islamic faith than other believers, rejecting several existing practices and ideas as *haram* (forbidden). He tried to convert members of this mosque as well as other mosques to his ways while building his own praying site – approaching the authorities for an authorization on 3 May 2007.<sup>34</sup> Tensions rapidly rose between Sheik Sualehe and other Muslims in Nhacole, including the newly arrived CISLAMO. Sheik Sualehe therefore withdrew from the Wahhabi mosque and moved to his own religious building in his personal compound. There he put in practice his own ideas and principles with a group of male and female followers. The person who was the official head of Nhacole village at the time described their ideas and principles as follows:

When Muslims finish their prayers, they always clean their face and wash their legs or feet. Yet there [in Sualehe’s mosque], you could not clean either your face or your feet before and after prayers. If you did, these practices were considered haram. The believers would not use the Muslim cofió [cap] of CISLAMO, but the men had to wear a cloth around the head; although some actually did not do that either. What they did is not wear the cofió of CISLAMO. Women’s dress, we know and we could see that they covered the whole body with a black dress, and we asked ourselves: do women not suffer from the heat with this sort of dress? Men dressed with short pants, which were not full pants in the real sense of the term.<sup>35</sup>

Although he had withdrawn to his own mosque, tensions between Sheik Sualehe and other Muslims continued, particularly between Sualehe and CISLAMO. There were many points of contention between Sheik Sualehe and the mainstream (and overwhelming majority of) Sufi Muslims of the area; for the Wahhabi Sheik though, the main point of disagreement was the believers’ relations with the state. While Sheik Sualehe rejected the state categorically, CISLAMO

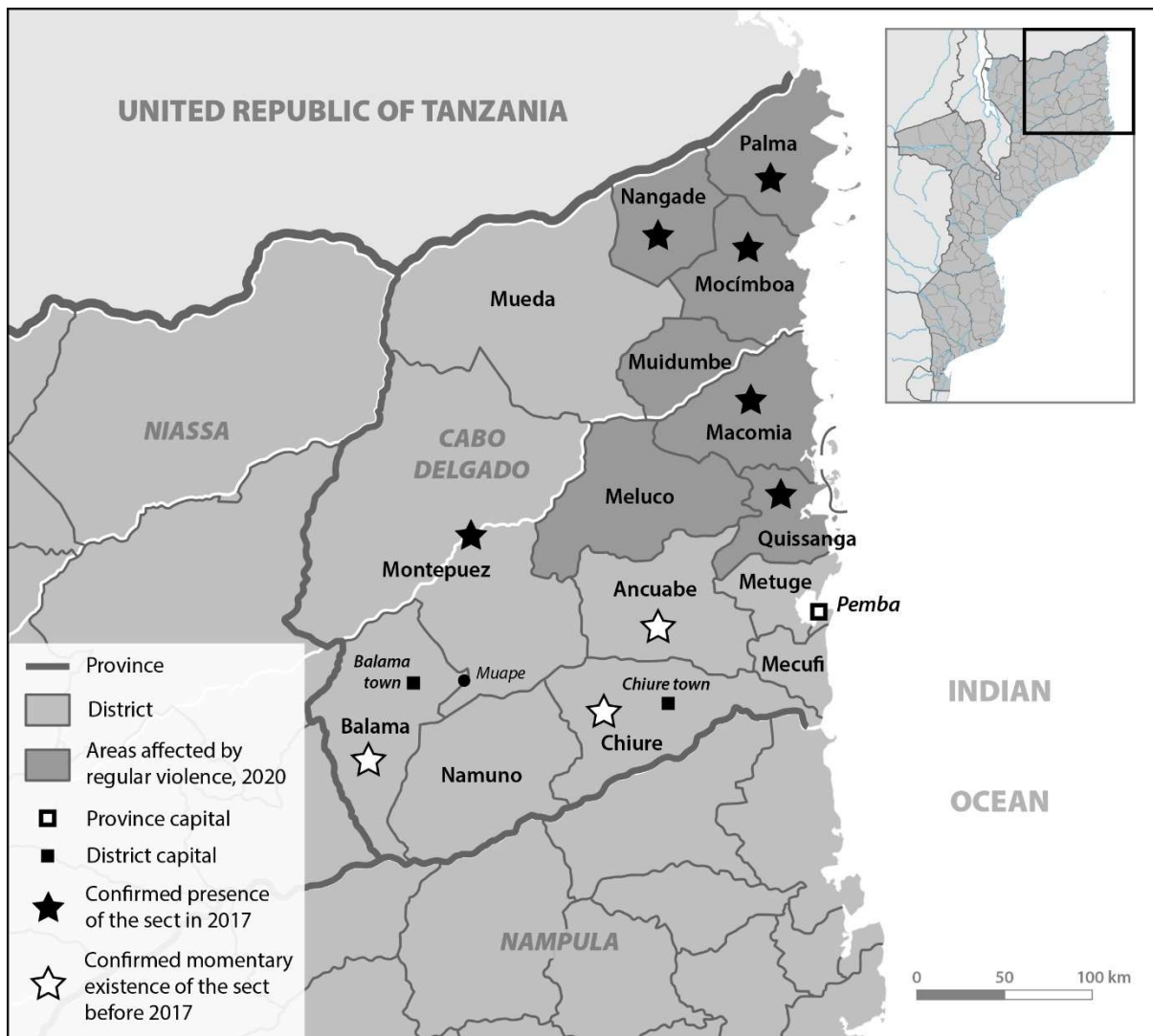
worked very closely with it. This led to a clash between Sualehe and CISLAMO as Sualehe denounced those who worked with the state as kaffir. After an exchange of letters and at least one meeting (on 16 May 2010) to try to resolve their differences,<sup>36</sup> CISLAMO decided to go to the state and formally denounce Sheik Sualehe. The district administrator looked into the issue and eventually decided to imprison Sualehe and some of his followers. On 21 March 2011, the administrator held a meeting with the imprisoned Sheik Sualehe and his followers to explain that the state would not allow anyone preaching the rejection of the (secular) state and preventing their children from going to school. In effect, the administrator expelled Sheik Sualehe and his followers from Balama unless they changed their ideas and practices. The Sheik decided to leave the district, and he and some of his followers went to Tanzania.<sup>37</sup> The Sheik returned to Nhacole for a short visit (maybe two visits) before establishing himself elsewhere in the province. No interviewees could say where he went exactly after leaving Nhacole. This is an important question that needs further research, first, to ascertain whether Sheik Sualehe was the founder of the Al-Shabaab sect and, second, to trace whether and how he disseminated the sect in the province.

What we know is that Sualehe did not flee to the district of Chiure. Here the sect began in 2014 (possibly in 2013) and the founder of the group was a man called Abdul Carimo. Born in Chiure, of Makua ethnicity, Abdul Carimo is said to have been influenced by a sheik from Mocímboa da Praia. After joining the sect, he began to clash with believers at his regular mosque in Chiure. To further his views and practices, Sheik Abdul decided to set up his own mosque at his home in the neighbourhood of Namuita. Some people followed him, and thus Sheik Abdul developed the sect in his house, turning it into a compound when he added a Madrasa (school) and several other houses.<sup>38</sup> Later an affiliated mosque opened in the neighbourhood of Nhamissir. As with Sheik Sualehe in Balama, other Muslims were not happy with the presence of this sect and the Islamic Council on several occasions tried to get Sheik Abdul and his followers to abandon their efforts.<sup>39</sup> On 4 October 2015 the sect came to the attention of the authorities when members verbally vilified an official ceremony taking place in town for Peace day. The following year sect members protested again, shouting that the ceremony was 'haram'.<sup>40</sup> A month later, in early November 2016, things turned sour when sect members in Intutupué, in neighbouring Ancuabe district, clashed with other Muslims and killed one. Six of the men who were involved in the killing fled to Chiure town where the police immediately arrested them. The following day, on 3 November 2016, the residents of Chiure were instructed to destroy the Al-Shabaab mosque in Nhamissir neighbourhood just as 36 sect members armed with knives and machetes besieged the local police station, demanding the liberation of their arrested colleagues. Violence erupted in Nhamissir on the next day as sect members demanded the return of the materials from their destroyed mosque, which the authorities had confiscated. When a believer threw a machete at the police, they fired back, injuring Sheik Abdul. The police arrested 21 men who were rapidly put on trial and condemned to a 15-month prison sentence. The police sent the Intutupué men back to Ancuabe district where they were placed on trial and also sentenced to jail terms. The injured Sheik Abdul, for his part, was sent to hospital from where he and a colleague escaped as soon as his health improved. He was recaptured during the course of 2017 and is reported to have died in jail in 2018.<sup>41</sup>



In spite of these difficulties (and sometimes because of them), the Al-Shabaab sect expanded across the province of Cabo Delgado through the 2010s. The national Islamic conference that took place in Nampula in 2016 concluded that, by the end of that year, the sect was prevalent in four districts of Cabo Delgado province, namely Palma, Nangade, Mocímboa da Praia, and Montepuez.<sup>42</sup> There were also signs of its presence in Macomia and Quissanga, where problems arose in 2015 and 2017 (see next section). In other words, by 2016 Al-Shabaab had a presence in at least five districts of Cabo Delgado, and had been expelled from another three, namely Balama, Ancuabe, and Chiure (Map 1). It is not clear whether the sect had any headquarters by 2016, but if they did, it was probably in Mocímboa da Praia where, by 2016–17, it was not only building a second mosque in Nanduadua neighbourhood but one made of cement (a fact which would suggest they had plans to stay for the long term). The history of the sect in Mocímboa da Praia is not fully clear yet. Researchers Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira suggest that it started there as early as 2013 or 2014.<sup>43</sup> An account by a Sufi sheik I interviewed suggests an even earlier date: the sheik declared he travelled to Mocímboa in 2010, and again in 2011, to resolve conflicts between his community and the Al-Shabaab sect, suggesting that the sect had begun there in 2010 at the latest.<sup>44</sup>

**Map 1.** Sect presence and armed activities in Cabo Delgado. Designed by Dorian Ryser.



## Shift to violence and international links

What induced the Al-Shabaab sect to engage in violent action in October 2017? While verbally aggressive, the sect seemed happy enough in its initial years to withdraw from society and function separate from society. What brought about the shift from building a counter-society under sharia rule to waging a jihadi war to transform state and society? The report by Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira refers to the militarization of Al-Shabaab in 2015, but it is silent on why this happened.<sup>45</sup> Several individuals we interviewed in Cabo Delgado told us that, from the very beginning, the sect had had a military dimension – members would have always taken military training.<sup>46</sup> This seems improbable. For one, why would they have trained for ten years without engaging in any armed action? For another, several police authorities told us clearly that up to 2017 they never found any proof for the distribution of arms amongst sect members; all that the sect members had were locally bought machetes and knives.<sup>47</sup> It might thus be that the military dimension is read into the sect's past in light of the recent violent action. Following on Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira and other interviews, it rather seems the case that the sect shifted to a violent approach in or around 2015. Building on data gathered from different sources, I suggest that the sect shifted its overall strategy after being at the receiving end of increased opposition and repression by mainstream Muslim organizations and the state – with a tipping point reached around 2016.

While mainstream Muslim leaders on various occasions dealt with the sect on their own, by trying to engage them in dialogue and debate (as seen above), they also lobbied the state to repress the sect from the very start of its existence. In Balama district this led to the expulsion of the sect in 2011. In many, if not most other districts, however, state administrators refused to intervene. Like the governor of Cabo Delgado, they saw the conflict as an intra-Muslim affair and reckoned that it was not the role of a representative of the secular state to intervene in a disagreement over religious interpretation and practice.<sup>48</sup> This understanding changed in 2015–16, however, when the sect engaged in a series of violent clashes with state authorities. It began at the latest in November 2015 when Al-Shabaab members forcefully tried to prevent the sale of alcohol in the village of Pangane, district of Macomia. Bar and shop owners called the police, inflaming the situation: a member of the sect stabbed a police officer to death and the police injured two sect members.<sup>49</sup> Though it is not clear whether the government acted in response to this attack, still during the same year it deported two Kenyan and Tanzanian sect members (leaders?) from Mocímboa da Praia.<sup>50</sup> Then, in November 2016, violence took place in Intutupué (Ancuabe district) during which one man was killed and several sect members fled to Chiure, as we saw above. This led to violence in Chiure town during which the town's sect leader was shot, 27 sect members were jailed and the town's Al-Shabaab mosques were destroyed. This list of events is probably not exhaustive, but we know that repression continued, if not increased, in 2017 with the state detaining many Al-Shabaab men in Quissanga and Macomia districts for calling on the population not to respect the secular state.<sup>51</sup> The police in Macomia district explained their actions against the sect in June 2017 in the following manner:

These three citizens are creating disinformation, calling on the population not to respect the existence of the Government, calling for disrespect to the authorities, non-attendance of schools, and the use of cutting objects such as knives and other instruments for selfprotection.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, not only was there an increasing number of incidents in 2015–16, but by late 2016 the government was actively countering the sect, arresting men solely for belonging to the sect. It is probable that the sect leaders concluded thereafter that building and living in a counter-society was not possible anymore. They probably shifted then their strategy to achieve their goal of living in a sharia-based political order from withdrawing from society to attacking the state, in order to change the way society operated. They thus shifted from Islamist sectarianism to armed jihadism.<sup>53</sup>

The emergence of the Al-Shabaab sect and its shift to armed jihadism around 2016 did not happen in a vacuum. When the sect emerged in the 2000s, the province of Cabo Delgado was (as it still is) one of the poorest in Mozambique. It was (and remains) an area deeply divided between Muslims and Christians, not so much because of religion per se as because religious divisions are superimposed onto ethnic, social, political, and power divisions. These are not essential divisions, but social and historical constructs which have crystallized over time.<sup>54</sup> The result is that the coastal Makua (Makua-Meto) and Mwani communities form a Muslim majority whilst the minority Makonde, Christian by religion, hold the social, economic and political power in the province. Both the Makua but even more the Mwani resent this domination in light of their own ‘glorious’ pre-colonial Islamic and Swahili past (albeit as slave traders). The Makonde have always been a backbone for the ruling Frelimo party (with a Makonde elected as its president in late 2014) while the Mwani have historically aligned themselves with the opposition Renamo party (particularly since the multiparty elections of 1994).<sup>55</sup> Tensions are particularly strong in certain towns. In Mocímboa da Praia, which is divided along sectarian lines, ethnic riots erupted in 2005 when Renamo rejected the results of the national election and sectarian looting and killing took place.<sup>56</sup> The 2000s were also uncertain in economic terms. An illegal economy flourished with smuggling, the illicit mining of minerals, poaching and drug trafficking, while a liberal (and relatively weak) local government allowed the immigration of many individuals from Tanzania and other African countries.<sup>57</sup> Even in the religious sphere things were changing fast and becoming more uncertain. Intra-Muslim tensions developed with the introduction of Wahhabi institutions in Cabo Delgado in the 1990s and 2000s, led by CISLAMO and AMA.<sup>58</sup> There was also competition from new Christian organizations that moved into the province in the 1990s and 2000s to convert the last ‘un-churched’ communities in the world, namely the Mwani and Makua-Meto of Cabo Delgado.<sup>59</sup>

In spite of this evidence, many intellectuals, religious actors, and politicians refuse to accept that the armed violence has anything to do with the dynamics of the Muslim society of Cabo Delgado. They believe instead that the insurgency is a conspiracy. Various theories exist, ranging from a conspiracy by a foreign power (e.g. the CIA)<sup>60</sup> or private interests (oil companies aiming to control Mozambique’s natural resources),<sup>61</sup> to a Muslim conspiracy (Islamists ‘moving down’ the eastern coastline of Africa) or a political conspiracy from within Mozambique (a Frelimo faction aiming to undermine the country’s Makonde president).<sup>62</sup> Underpinning many of these arguments is a view that the insurgents have ‘no face’ and their religion is a cloak or ‘smokescreen’ for objective material or political interests.<sup>63</sup> The problem with such an argument is that the Al-Shabaab sect emerged in the mid or late 2000s on the basis of a particular (political) reading of the Islamic faith. That does not mean that there cannot be a conspiracy, but rather that if there is one, it either had to have been initiated before 2007 (quite unlikely) or had to take

place at later stages through infiltration or manipulation, something which is quite different from a true conspiracy. A related argument is that the Al-Shabaab insurgency originated from outside the country. As our research shows, however, the insurgency builds on a Mozambican religious sect whose leadership was primarily Mozambican. It therefore seems difficult to sustain an argument for an ‘external invasion’ or even an ‘import’ that led to the insurgency. There are of course external influences, connections, and collaborations but this is, again, quite different from a total exteriority – a subject which still needs to be investigated properly.

Linked to this is the question of the connection of the insurgents to ISIS. In mid-2019 Al-Shabaab made a pledge to the international organization and formally integrated the newly-constituted Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP). An author has advanced that this led to a major influx of foreign fighters and commanders (no less than 40 commanders, he argues) and the take-over of Al-Shabaab by ISIS, that is to say: the end of Al-Shabab.<sup>64</sup> The conclusion seems precipitated, all the more so considering it is based on information not cross-checked. What we know for sure is that the insurgents fly the ISIS flag and communicate with ISIS. The Islamic state media has published an increasing number of claims in relation to Mozambique since June 2019, with photos and later videos, indicating a strengthening of the virtual links between Al-Shabaab and ISIS. We have not seen a technological shift, however, in media-production (videos were still made on mobile phones in early 2020) or any other technological or other shift which would indicate a take-over of Al-Shabaab by ISIS. One may expect that there will be a strengthening of ties between the two actors over time and that ISIS will eventually influence the insurgents’ strategy, tactics and targeting. But one cannot assume that this has happened or will happen. Hard data about the present situation is scarce and the future is uncertain. Moreover, there are elements that indicate that there are already divergences between Al-Shabaab and ISIS. We know, for example, that the insurgents continue to call themselves Al-Shabaab when addressing the local population and that they insist they are locals. There has also been a significant decrease in information about Mozambique in ISIS media in the second half of May and in June 2020, just as the Al-Shabaab began to circulate independently videos in the Swahili language and Al-Qaeda made a first claim to attack in Mozambique.<sup>65</sup> If the Nigerian experience is anything to go by, we need to consider all possible options for the future: the Al-Shabaab sect might increase its links to ISIS, but it could just as well not do so, or diverge if not break away from ISIS, and even change allegiance. In Nigeria, Boko Haram connected to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in 2010 and this led to a momentary dissidence within the Nigerian movement. In 2015, the movement made a pledge of allegiance to ISIS and this led to the movement splitting in two a year later, one faction retaining its connections to ISIS while the other returned to its original identity and autonomy – a situation that continues to this day.<sup>66</sup> In other words, allegiance can shift and this is all the more possible in Mozambique considering there are several points of (potential) tension between the Mozambican Al-Shabaab and ISIS, whether in relation to religious ideas and practices (Al-Shabaab are Quranists while ISIS is not), race and nationalism (ISIS is primarily Arab), as well as strategy and power/control.

## **Conclusion**

This article focused on the origins, nature and beginning of the insurgency in Mozambique. It uncovered that the insurgents, commonly referred to as Al-Shabaab, build on a religious sect which emerged around 2007. By definition, sects withdraw from society and this was the case in Cabo Delgado as Al-Shabaab leaders and members built their own mosques and distanced themselves from state institutions and the wider society. The sect was Islamist, thus aiming to establish a counter-society ruled exclusively according to Islamic law (sharia). The sect had nothing to do with the Sufi Muslim majority of Cabo Delgado or the Wahhabi Islamic Council of Mozambique (CISLAMO), who opposed the sect from the start. While both CISLAMO and the sect shared scripturalist ideas, they differed on several points, the most important being the relation Muslims should have with the state. Over a ten-year period, the sect established itself in at least eight districts of Cabo Delgado before turning to violence in 2017. In 2016, the sect was active in Palma, Nangade, Mocímboa da Praia, Macomia, Quissanga, and Montepuez districts; it had earlier had a presence in Balama, Ancuabe and Chiure districts. The article argues that the sect probably shifted to armed jihadism as a consequence of the repression it experienced from the mainstream Muslim organizations and, later on, the state – the latter’s involvement possibly tipping the sect into abandoning its approach of withdrawing from society. Finally, the article considered alternative explanations for the insurgency’s origins and development, including the insurgents’ link to the Islamic State. It argued that, while conspiracy and international factors were important, they need to be kept in proportion. There certainly have been external influences and manipulations, and Al-Shabaab has indeed linked up with ISIS, but it is doubtful that these factors radically and definitively altered the nature of the insurgents. The article argued that it is more productive to think of the Al-Shabaab insurgents in terms of their historical trajectory, developing from an Islamist sect into a violent jihadi armed group, undergoing a process of internationalization which can develop or evolve in various ways in the future.

## Notes

1. Joseph Hanlon, “Mozambique’s Insurgency: A New Boko Haram or Youth Demanding an End to Marginalisation?.” *Blog LSE*, 19 June 2018 (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2018/06/19/mozambiques-insurgency-a-new-boko-haram-or-youth-demanding-an-end-to-marginalisation> , accessed 19 June 2018). João Mosca sees the insurgency as part of a ‘resource curse’; see “João Mosca: Cabo Delgado já vive ‘maldição dos recursos naturais’.” *Deutsche Welle*, 3 January 2020 (<https://www.dw.com/pt-002/jo%C3%A3o-mosca-cabo-delgado-j%C3%A1-vive-maldi%C3%A7%C3%A3o-dos-recursos-naturais/a-51711555>, accessed 3 January 2020).
2. Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira, *Radicalização Islâmica*, 11–12.
3. Santos, “War in Resource-Rich Northern Mozambique,” 11–12; and Liazzat Bonate, “Why the Mozambican Government’s Alliance with the Islamic Council of Mozambique Might not End the Insurgency in Cabo Delgado.” *Zitamar*, 14 June 2019 (<https://zitamar.com/mozambican-governments-alliance-islamic-council-mozambique-might-not-end-insurgency-cabo-delgado>, accessed 14 June 2019).
4. International Crisis Group, “Al-Shabaab Five Years after Westgate” See also Sunguta West, “Ansar al-Sunna: A New Militant Islamist Group Emerges in Mozambique.” *Terrorism Monitor* (Jameston Foundation), 14 June 2018, 5–7; and Eleanor Beevor, “Who Are Mozambique’s Jihadists?.” International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) blog ‘Analysis’, 25 March 2020

- (<https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2020/03/csdp-mozambique-jihadists>, accessed 3 February 2020).
5. Matsinhe and Valoi, “The Genesis of Insurgency,” 9; and Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira, *Radicalização Islâmica*. See also Gregory Pirio, Robert Pittelli and Yussuf Adam, “The Emergence of Violent Extremism in Northern Mozambique.” Spotlights Africa, Centre for Strategic Studies (USA), <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/the-emergence-of-violent-extremism-in-northern-mozambique/> (accessed 26 March 2018).
  6. Mustapha, *Sects & Social Disorder*, 3.
  7. Chome, “From Islamic Reform to Muslim Activism.”
  8. Raquel Loureiro and António Cascais, “Ataque em Mocímboa da Praia terá sido ‘caso isolado’.” *Deutsche Welle*, 16 October 2017 (<https://www.dw.com/pt-002/ataque-em-moc%C3%ADmboa-da-praia-ter%C3%A1-sido-caso-isolado/a-40977442>, accessed 16 October 2017).
  9. Agência Lusa, “Grupo que atacou polícia no norte de Moçambique visava provocar desordem.” *Deutsche Welle*, 6 October 2017 (<https://www.dw.com/pt-002/grupo-que-atacou-pol%C3%ADcia-no-norte-de-mo%C3%A7ambique-visava-provocar-desordem/a-40849000>, accessed 8 October 2017).
  10. Francisco Mandlate, “Jovens radicais sonham com califado em Mocímboa da Praia.” *O País* (Maputo), 9 October 2017 (<http://opais.sapo.mz/jovens-radica-is-sonham-com-califado-em-mocimboa-da-praia->, accessed 9 October 2017).
  11. Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira, *Radicalização Islâmica*, 11.
  12. Ibid. Some authors mistakenly use the term Ansar al-Sunna which is the name of a youth branch of the Islamic Council of Mozambique. Ansar al-Sunna has nothing to do with the insurgency; in Cabo Delgado it is registered as Ansaru-Sunna.
  13. For this reason, I have chosen to use this term in the article. In contrast, the United States’ administration seems to have made a tactical choice to use the term Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamaah to avoid politicians in Washington conflating the Mozambican movement with the Somali organization. See, for example, US Embassy in Mozambique, Mozambique 2018.
  14. Cited by Agência Lusa, “Grupo que atacou polícia.” *Deutsche Welle*, 6 October 2017, *op.cit.*
  15. Mandlate, “Jovens radicais sonham.” *O País* (Maputo), 9 October 2017, *op. cit.*
  16. Lusa, “Mocímboa culpa migrações e recrutamento no estrangeiro pelos ataques em Moçambique.” *Diário de Notícias* (Lisbon), 15 October 2017 (<https://www.dn.pt/lusa/reportagemmocimboa-culpa-migracoes-e-recrutamento-no-estrangeiro-pelos-ataques-em-mocambique-8844248.html>, accessed 7 October 2019).
  17. Mandlate, “Jovens radicais sonham.” *O País* (Maputo), 9 October 2017, *op. cit.*
  18. Interview, April 2019.
  19. Cited by Nádia Issufo, “Ataques em Moçambique: ‘Está tudo sob controlo em Palma’.” *Deutsche Welle*, 2 May 2018 (<https://www.dw.com/pt-002/ataques-em-mo%C3%A7ambique-est%C3%A1-tudo-sob-controlo-em-palma/a-43600360>, accessed 2 May 2018).

20. *Monbés* is a pejorative term in Mozambique meaning ‘Asian Muslims’.
21. Cited by Mandlate, “Jovens radicais sonham.” *O País* (Maputo), 9 October 2017, op. cit. The authors of this report translated this quote and all other quotes in this report.
22. Cited by Loureiro and Cascais, “Ataque em Mocímboa da Praia.” *Deutsche Welle*, 16 October 2017, op. cit.
23. Where the niqab veil covers only the head, the burqa covers the entire body from head to feet, with only the eye slit as opening.
24. Quranists pray three times a day; they do not recognise the Hadiths that specify five prayers per day. Quranists derive their name from the fact that they only recognise the Quran as a legitimate source of religious law and guidance.
25. Interview with Sheik M., Mocímboa da Praia, 2018.
26. Kaarsholm claims the secularism practiced in Mozambique was ‘radical’. See Kaarsholm, “Islam, Secularist Government, and State-Civil Society Interaction”. For another viewpoint, see Morier-Genoud, “A Prospect of Secularization?” and “The 1996 ‘Muslim holiday’ affair.”
27. Tibi, Islamism and Islam. Olivier Roy made the same point more than 20 years ago, calling it ‘le grand malentendu’ (the great misunderstanding); see Roy, *Généalogie de l’islamisme*.
28. Among the huge literature on ‘sects’, see Johnson, “A Critical Appraisal of the Church-Sect Typology.”
29. The *Conselho Islâmico de Moçambique* (CISLAMO) is a Wahhabi organization recognized by the government and financed by the Kuwaiti Africa Muslim Agency (AMA).
30. Relatório da Conferência islâmica, Nampula 10–13 de Novembro de 2016, pp. 13–14. There are only few Shia in Cabo Delgado, and the presenter talking about this province boasted that they had managed to expel them from the town of Mocímboa da Praia.
31. Interview with Sheik X., Pemba, 2019.
32. Interview with Sheik X., Pemba, 2019.
33. Mustapha makes the same point in relation to Boko Haram in Nigeria; see Mustapha, *Sect & Social Disorder*, ch. 3.
34. Copy of the application in possession of the author.
35. Interview with official head of Nhacole, Balama, 2019.
36. Copies of the minutes of the meeting in possession of the author; interview with CISLAMO sheik, Balama, 2019.
37. There is another version of the story whereby the state expelled Sualehe in 2009 and he returned in 2010, only to be expelled again in 2011.
38. Interview with A. and B., Chiure, 2019.
39. Sheik Abdulcarimo Fadile, “O Problema do Muçulmano ser um Funcionário Público.” *Al-Hujumu* (Pemba), No. 40, 13 December 2015.

40. Interview with C., Chiure, 2019.
41. Interview with C., A. and B., and D., Chiure, 2019.
42. *Relatório da Conferência islâmica*, Nampula 10–13 de Novembro de 2016, 13.
43. Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira, *Radicalização Islâmica*, 13.
44. Interview with Sheik X., Pemba, 2019; and Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira, *Radicalização Islâmica*, 13–15.
45. Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira, *Radicalização Islâmica*, 10.
46. Interview with Y., Pemba, 2018; interview with W., Pemba, 2018.
47. Interview with D., Pemba, 2019.
48. Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira, *Radicalização Islâmica*, 13; and interview with F., Pemba, 2019.
49. “Tumultos em Pangane provocam morte e feridos.” *Domingo* (Maputo), 9 November 2015 (<https://www.jornaldomingo.co.mz/index.php/arquivo/26-reportagem/7791-tumultos-empangane-provocam-morte-e-feridos>, accessed 3 February 2018).
50. Interview with Y., Pemba, 2018; interview with W., Pemba, 2018.
51. Chichava, “Os primeiros sinais do ‘Al Shabaab’ em Cabo Delgado.”
52. Adelina Pinto, “Detidos três membros de grupo muçulmano que promove desinformação em Cabo Delgado.” *Mazagane Independente* (Maputo), 21 June 2017 (<http://www.magazineindependente.com/www2/detidos-tres-membros-grupo-muculmano-promovedesinformacao-cabo-delgado>, accessed 27 April 2020). Rádio Moçambique published the item the day before, but it has disappeared from its website.
53. Tibi, *Islamism and Islam*, 135. The term jihadi is problematic since it has two meanings, the less known one referring to the self-discipline that is necessary to become a good religious person. Bonelli and Carrié offer as alternative the cumbersome expression ‘political violence making reference to Islam’. I use the term armed or violent jihadi. See Bonelli and Carrié, *La fabrique de la radicalité*, 15.
54. For a constructivist reading of ethnicity in Mozambique, see Sérgio Chichava, “Por uma leitura sócio-histórica da etnicidade em Moçambique.”
55. Feijó, “Assimetrias no acesso ao Estado.”
56. Ana Sousa Santos, “History, Memory and Violence,” ch. 8.
57. Haysom, *Where Crime Compounds Conflict*.
58. Bonate, “Transformations de l’islam à Pemba”; Declich, “Transmission of Muslim practices and women’s agency”; Macagno, “Les nouveaux Oulémas”; Morier-Genoud, “L’islam au Mozambique après l’indépendance.”



59. Morier-Genoud, “The 1996 ‘Muslim holiday’ affair,” 421–22. For Cabo Delgado specifically, see for example The Joshua project ([https://joshuaproject.net/people\\_groups/13902/MZ](https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/13902/MZ), accessed 4 November 2019).
60. Jacinto Veloso, “O cenário mais provável.” *Savana* (Maputo), 5 June 2020. Jacinto Veloso is a very influential Mozambican politician who has held many high positions, including head of the secret services.
61. Among others, see the (influential) writings on Facebook of Julião João Cumbane, CEO of Empresa Nacional de Parques de Ciências e Tecnologias (Maputo).
62. The opposition and some Frelimo officials are very keen on this idea. See, for example, the declaration of the late head of the opposition in André Baptista, “Dhlakama fala de ‘cunho político’ nos ataques de Mocímboa da Praia.” *Voice of America*, 17 October 2017 (<https://www.voaportugues.com/a/dhlakama-fala-de-cunho-politico-nos-ataques-de-mocimboa/4074861.html>, accessed 17 October 2017).
63. The bishop of Pemba has argued repeatedly that the insurgents have ‘no face’ and the president of the Republic has said the same on several occasions. Among others, see the Bishop’s “Comunicado do Bispo de Pemba aos cristãos e às pessoas de boa vontade.” Pemba, 10 June 2018, and President Nyusi cited in Ramos Miguel, “Nyusi reconhece ser difícil conhecer motivações dos ataques em Cabo Delgado.” *VOA Português*, 6 June 2019 (<https://www.voaportugues.com/a/nyusi-reconhece-ser-dif%C3%ADcil-conhecer-motiva%C3%A7%C3%B5es-dos-ataques-em-cabo-delgado/4948100.html>, accessed 14 October 2019).
64. Nuno Rogeiro, *O Cabo do Medo*, 175 (and 204 for the commanders).
65. See the ‘Cabo Ligado’ reports for these months (<https://acleddata.com/cabo-ligadomozambique-conflict-observatory/>). The Al-Qaeda claim was made by the Thabat Agency on 22 May 2020. For the insurgents’ videos in Swahili, see Pinnacle News Facebook page on 29 May 2020 (<https://www.facebook.com/pinnaclenews79>, accessed 29 May 2020).
66. Vincent Foucher “Nigeria: divisions au sein du groupe jihadiste Boko Haram.” *Radio France Internationale*, 25 February 2017 (<http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20170225-nigeria-bokoharam-divisions-al-barnawi-shekau-vincent-foucher-icg>, accessed 3 January 2020); International Crisis Group, “Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province.” *ICG Report* no. 273, 16 May 2019 (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/273-facing-challenge-islamic-state-west-africa-province>, accessed 3 January 2020); Zenn, “Boko Haram’s Conquest for the Caliphate.”

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