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God, Grievance and Greed: War in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique*

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Abstract

In 2017 a 'new war', characterised as a jihadist insurgency, erupted in the northerly Mozambican province of Cabo Delgado.The war began in the context of the discovery of new natural resources, the setting up of transnational extractive industries and of an economic crisis generated by the 'hidden debt' scandal. Harsh military responses from the Mozambican government and international actors – SADC and Rwanda especially – have not halted the insurgency, which has dramatically expanded, especially since the insurgents declared their allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) in 2019, causing massive internal displacement of the civil population.

This article is an introduction to the special issue, *God, Grievance and Greed: War in Cabo Delgado (Mozambique*), which aims to bring historical and ethnographic depth to the study of this conflict. The issue draws together a series of layered interventions reflecting the multi-faceted nature of the events, as well as their social and

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human dimensions, without silencing the voices of the people involved. This introduction serves to frame those interventions, establishing a broad chronology of the conflict; provide an overview of the complex history of Cabo Delgado; discuss the literature produced so far on the insurgency; and locate the events in Cabo Delgado at the interface between local dynamics – capitalist extraction, the erosion of democratic processes, youth marginalisation, ethnic conflict – and global jihadism.

Keywords

Cabo Delgado, insurgency, Mozambique, jihadism, political violence

A map of Cabo Delgado, courtesy of Cabo Ligado/ACLED.

Outlines of a 'new war'

On 4 October 2017, a group of youths attacked a police station in the crossroad village of Awassi, in the northerly Mozambican province of Cabo Delgado, near the border with Tanzania, routing the standing policemen and stealing weapons. The following day, the attacks carried on in the coastal town of Mocímboa da Praia, leading to clashes with the police, looting, more theft of weapons, and the freeing of prisoners from jails. The date was symbolic for Mozambicans, as it marked the anniversary of the peace accords that in 1992 had ratified the end of a sixteen-year civil war between the party in power, Frelimo (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique) and the anti-governmental militias, Renamo (Mozambican National Resistance). This conflict – one of the bloodiest proxy battlefields of the so-called Cold War – had brought the country to its knees, destroying infrastructure and causing massive death and displacement.[1] In the thirty years that followed the Peace Accord, Mozambique moved from being a donor darling to sinking into a financial crisis caused by a two-billion dollar secret debt deal sealed by its second democratically-elected president, Armando Emilio Guebuza.[2] The debt was contracted in the context of the discovery of massive mineral resources: especially, coal in Tete, and huge fields of natural gas, rubies and graphite in Cabo Delgado. The conflict between Frelimo and Renamo rekindled in a low-intensity manner from 2013 onwards, in the centre of the country, largely as a consequence of shrinking spaces for political participation and creeping authoritarianism. In 2017, peace talks were under way. But what was this new violence erupting in Cabo Delgado?

The attacks in Mocímboa da Praia took even the most well-informed observers by surprise. Reports from the ground described the insurgents as an Islamist group. A few weeks later, a video circulated on social media, showing a circle of men standing in the bush, heads scarfed, holding AK-47s, and inciting Mozambicans to take up arms in a jihad against moral corruption. Reaction to the news and the clip were incredulous. Some spoke of fabrication, others of exaggeration. And yet, people on the ground knew better.[3] Locals referred to the existence of a group – known as Al-Shabab, Ash-Shabab, Ansar al Sunna, Ah al-Sunna wa'l'Jamaa, or *mashababe* – that confronted local Islamic religious establishments and underwent military training in the bush.[4] In the two months that followed, raids on villages in the districts of Mocímboa and Palma escalated. Concurrently, the Mozambican State launched a

1 On the civil war in Mozambique, see among others, D. Robinson, 'Curse on the land: A history of the Mozambican Civil War' (University of Western Australia, 2006); E. Morier-Genoud, M. Cahen and D. M do Rosário (eds), *The war within: New perspectives on the Mozambican civil war* (Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2018).

2 On the secret debt scandal, see the numerous reports of the *Centro de Integridade Pública* in Mozambique, https://www.cipmoz.org/pt/dividas-ocultas/.

3 One of the authors of this article, Paolo Israel, travelled throughout Cabo Delgado in December 2017, collecting impressions from a range of actors.

4 In Arabic, the term is written 'Al-Shabab' ('the youths', singular, 'Al-Shab') but pronounced 'Ash-shabab', also in Cabo Delgado. When appropriated in local languages (Emakhuwa, Kimwani, Shimakonde), this becomes *mashababe*. In graffiti left in 2020, the insurgents wrote 'Al-Shabaabe' (see the image in this issue), P. Israel, 'Violence and the voice note: The War for Cabo Delgado in Social Media (Mozambique, 2020)', *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 50, May 2024, 15. From 2021, the insurgents increasingly used 'Islamic State' to describe themselves.

brutal repression. Indiscriminate arrests were carried out. People whispered of summary executions and mass graves. In the first days of 2018, villages in the area of Palma were shelled by helicopter and battleship fire. And yet, the military intervention did not quell the insurgency.

Throughout 2018, the insurgents – as they were broadly referred to[5] – continued carrying out attacks on local villages in the northern part of the province, especially the districts of Palma, Mocímboa and Nangade. These attacks seemingly had several objectives: stealing weapons from the army; looting food from villagers; displacing local populations through terror; and murdering in a gruesome way agents of State power, such as community authorities.[6] The Mozambican army appeared largely unprepared to face this threat, losing ground and equipment to what it described as a 'faceless enemy'.[7] These attacks created a dramatic flow of internally displaced persons (IDPs), who streamed into the city of Pemba by road and by boat. In the first half of 2019, the insurgency moved south, nesting in the area between the road that connects Mocímboa to Awassi, to the north, the national road N380, to the east, and the banks of the Messalo river and the Quirimbas National Park, to the south. Not only did this constitute an area of thick, impenetrable woodland, impossible to survey by land or air: it soon appeared that the insurgent's core support base lay in the coastal villages of Macomia – especially Pangane and Mucojo – as much as in the popular neighbourhoods of Mocímboa da Praia. From its new base of operation, the insurgents started raiding the villages that dot the national road, from the northern part of Macomia to the eastern part of Mocímboa. In the frequent clashes, an increasing number of women as well as young men were kidnapped.

In July 2019, a video appeared on the media outlet of the Islamic State (ISIS or IS), showing the Mozambican insurgents swearing allegiance (*bayat*) to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[8] The Mozambican Al-Shabab were nested under the leadership of the Islamic State's Central African Province (ISCAP), itself a splinter group of the Ugandan rebel group ADF, now relocated in the northern Kivu.[9] If the details of the relationships between the Al-Shabab and the IS are still unclear, the oath of allegiance translated almost immediately into an escalation of military activities, increased tactical confidence, and better equipment. In the second half of 2019, attacks on the villages along the national road and in the districts of Macomia and Nangade intensified. Unable to face the threat, the Mozambican government recurred to the help of two foreign military contractors: the South African Dyck Advisory Group (DAG) and the Russian Wagner, both chosen on account of relationships constituted in the

5 Other designations included *malfeitores* (crooks) or *bandidos* (bandits). The term 'terrorists' was increasingly adopted by the Mozambican government from 2020 onwards.

6 Sources on the unfolding of the insurgency until August 2020 are scant and limited to newspaper articles, often imprecise and partial. The following reconstruction draws on notes and records kept by the authors, as well as conversations with local people.

7 S. Chichava, 'Who is "the enemy" attacking Cabo Delgado? Short presentation of the hypotheses of the Mozambican Government', *IDeIAS*, 127E, 2020.

8 https://monitoring.ifiadvisory.com/en/islamic-state-renewed-bayah-from-central-africa-province/?fbclid=IwAR0NfMZRZnU0Naq3sEeUnGDU7OZ5CAcX4tgTn4SkECw14S2kBTLdBGnZOUk.

9 On ISCAP, see J. Warner et al., *The Islamic State in Africa: The emergence, evolution, and future of the next jihadist battlefront* (London: Hurst, 2021).

socialist period and expanded in the post-socialist one.[10] Immediately after moving in, Wagner suffered heavy losses in an ambush.

The insurgency escalated in the year of 2020 amidst the confusion caused by the COVID pandemic. In February, the insurgents took on in frontal combat a garrison stationed at the abandoned village of Mbau, in southern Mocímboa da Praia. On 23 March, they attacked Mocímboa itself, with a coordinated action from land and sea, holding it for a day, distributing money looted from ATMs, and haranguing the local populations. One of these public harangues, by military leader Machude Bonomar, circulated broadly on social media. Bonomar explained the movement's grievances in terms of a critique of the government's moral corruption and threatened violence in case civilians sided with 'the pigs' – meaning the soldiers of the Mozambican army. Two days later, the insurgents raided the district of Quissanga. On 7 April, they ventured into the Makonde highlands, Muidumbe, cradle of the liberation struggle and Frelimo stronghold, occupying several villages and murdering over 50 people in the lowland village of Xitaxi. On 28 May, it was the turn of Macomia. On 27 June, the insurgents returned to Mocímboa, holding it for three days. The town was finally subdued on 11 August after a three-day offensive that resulted in the deaths of over a hundred soldiers from the Mozambican Defense and Security Forces (FDS).[11] At this point, the insurgency had raided all the major district headquarters of the northern half of Cabo Delgado, with the notable exception of Mueda, the military operational base of the province, and Palma, site of the liquefied natural gas project run by the Total Energies multinational. They also effectively controlled a large swathe of territory, from the town of Mocímboa to coastal areas of Macomia and the lowland sections of Muidumbe. In the second half of the year, they led a second onslaught on the district of Muidumbe, resulting in an almost entire depopulation. They also carried out a raid in Mtwara, in southern Tanzania. The number of IDPs grew to an estimated 800,000, hosted in a number of centres built by the government in southern Cabo Delgado – especially in Pemba, Metuge, Chiure, Montepuez – and in the province of Nampula.[12] After suffering losses and complaining of information leaks, Wagner abandoned the terrain.[13] DAG was left alone to support the war effort, with a small number of helicopters and no clear mandate to engage in land operations, amidst allegations of using chemical weapons. Meanwhile, the leaking of videos of torture by

10 The head of DAG, Lionel Dyck, a former Rhodesian soldier who became embedded in the Zimbabwean military, supported Samora Machel in fighting against Renamo during the Mozambican civil war – for which he was awarded a medal by Machel himself – and later in the 2010s. Mozambique entertained close relationship with the Soviet Union in the socialist period. The Frelimo government has ties with Putin's Russia too.

11 In August 2020 the online magazine *Cabo Ligado* was also created, a 'conflict observatory launched by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Zitamar News, and MediaFax to monitor political violence in Mozambique' (https://www.caboligado.com/about). While not immune to error, *Cabo Ligado* provides the most reliable account of the war. The reconstruction in the pages that follow has been fact-checked on the basis of the *Cabo Ligado* weekly and monthly updates.

12 The number of 800,000 refugees is an estimate that has been contested by some observers, pointing out that it might be inflated.

13 The group produced a commercial film to represent the events, in which the Mozambicans are depicted as treasonous and savage, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eqsXkwD1fh4. See also 'Prigozhin Bankrolls New Movie About Russian "Instructors" in Mozambique: "Granit" is the latest installment of films linked to Prigozhin that depict Russian mercenaries abroad', *Moscow Times*, 24 December 2021, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/12/24/prigozhin-bankrolls-new-movie-about-russian-instructors-in-mozambique-a75923.

FDS soldiers – including the brutal shooting of a naked woman at the Awassi crossroad – as well as the harassment and disappearance of journalists trying to cover the conflict, precipitated a moral crisis in the country.[14]

In 2021, the noose tightened around Palma and Total's LNG project. The town came under attack on 24 March with a well-concerted operation from multiple fronts. After a four-day siege, the insurgents managed to break through the defences, killing hundreds of locals and dozens of Total contractors. One independent report judged this to be 'the worst terror attack since 9/11, and the bloodiest disaster in the 164-year history of oil and gas'.[15] The event made the global news. Government forces only managed to retake the ravaged town on 5 April. As a consequence, Total declared *force majeure* and withdrew its personnel. In the months that followed, the insurgency pressed south, attacking villages in the district of Metuge. The fires could be seen from the provincial capital, Pemba, causing widespread consternation and anxiety. Cornered into despair, the Mozambican government turned for help to two regional partners: the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Rwanda.[16] Both responded to the distress call in July, the former deploying a multinational Southern African Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM), and the latter select troops.

The Rwandan intervention would turn out to be crucial in turning the tide of war. In the space of a few months, Rwandan soldiers – well-equipped, well-trained and experienced in bush guerrilla and intelligence gathering – retook Mocímboa da Praia and rooted out the insurgents from their bases in the Messalo region. Local populations, especially those who could communicate with the foreign soldiers in Kiswahili, hailed them as liberators. The insurgents were cornered in remote areas of Macomia and chased around in a deadly game of whack-a-mole. While SAMIM policed the central areas of the province, the Rwandan army established a cordon around the town of Palma, possibly with the intent of persuading Total that the security conditions were established for its return. Fearful of being accused of ruthless extractivism and social insensitivity, Total communicated that it would resume its activities only when a sense of stability was restored in the province and the majority of internally displaced populations returned to their homes. As a response, the Mozambican government actively promoted the return of the displaced, especially to the city of Mocímboa. The camps gradually thinned out, even as many refused to return to their homes until real peace was restored.

In the past two years, Cabo Delgado has been mired in chronic conflict. The town of Palma is sheltered within Rwanda's military cordon. In late 2023, the insurgency appeared weakened both financially and militarily. President Filipe Nyusi engaged in public spectacles of forgiveness and reintegration of repenting insurgents.

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14 On human rights violations in the year of 2020, see Amnesty International, 'What I Saw Is Death: War Crimes in Mozambique's Forgotten Cape' (London: Amnesty International, 2021), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr41/3545/2021/en/.

15 A. Perry, 'Palma Massacre: A hidden catastrophe uncovered', http://www.alex-perry.com/palma-massacre/. This report, based on extensive questionnaires administered in Palma, estimates the figure of local dead to be 1,193; of the kidnapped 209; and of Total contractors to be 55.

16 Negotiations with SADC had been underway for over a year, but the events of Palma precipitated the decision to appeal to this regional organisation.

The government promoted a rhetoric according to which the conflict was over, actively silencing dissenting voices, especially journalists. After the death in combat of military leader Bonomar Machude, in August 2023, rumours of peace talks and even collective surrender began to circulate. But the violence would not end. In the first half of 2024, attacks resumed dramatically in the southern districts of the province, near the city of Pemba, in Quissanga and Macomia, bringing new waves of refugees to the IDP camps and threatening the lives of the displaced in the district of Metuge. The SAMIM mission is due to withdraw in July. After commissioning a report on the humanitarian situation on the ground, Total is still hesitant to announce its return.[17] Much as similar insurgencies in the rest of the continent – especially in West Africa and the Sahel – there seems to be no foreseeable end in sight to the harrowing of Cabo Delgado.

Cabo Delgado at the crossroads of history

In the wake of the attacks of 5 October 2017, a major French newspaper referred to the theatre of the events, Mocímboa da Praia, as a *bourgade sans histoire* – a town without history or conflictual past.[18] Contrary to this superficial journalistic perception, Cabo Delgado is a place layered with histories, which rooted in the *longue durée* of Indian Ocean exchanges. Understanding those is fundamental to the apprehension of the current conflict. While, as we will see, a great number of security and consultancy reporting recur to mechanistic schemas of causation and 'drivers', the war unfolding in Cabo Delgado is a continuation of relentless cycles of violence that have plagued this region since at least the seventeenth century in a particularly intense manner.[19] For the benefit of the reader not acquainted with the history of this space, we provide here a brief overview.

The coastal areas of northern and central Mozambique were part of the Indian Ocean trading spheres as early as the first century BCE, but the expansion of Islam and the formation of the Swahili enclaves along the East African coast from the eighth century onwards, drew them into the Swahili networks. Archaeological excavations along coastal Cabo Delgado, the bulk of which took place between the 1970s and 1990s, uncovered the remnants of Swahili settlements on the Quirimba Islands, dating between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, as well as on the coastal regions of Gomene, Pangane, Quiwia and Tungui, dating from the sixteenth to the

17 J.-C. Rufin and I. Glowacki, 'Report on the socioeconomic, humanitarian and human rights situation in the Palma-Afungi-Mocímboa area', March 2023. The report was criticised for downplaying the role of gas as a driver of conflict. J. Feijó, 'Total Energies palliative solutions to extractivism problems – reflections on Jean-Christophe Rufin's report', https://omrmz.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/DR-237-Eng-2.pdf .

18 https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2018/03/24/au-mozambique-un-peril-djihadiste-venu-du-nord_5275844_3210.html. The ominous Hegelian overtones of the expression *sans histoire* are evident.

19 See in this special issue the interventions by Santos, Israel and Feijó and Orre. On the history of Cabo Delgado more generally, see especially A. R. Conceição, *Entre Mar e a Terra: Situações Identitárias do Norte de Moçambique* (Maputo: Promédia, 2006), 201–210, 228–238; E. C. Medeiros, *História de Cabo Delgado e do Niassa (c. 1836–1929)* (Maputo: Central Impressora, 1997), 110–113, 139–165; R. Pélissier, *História de Moçambique: Formação e Oposição, 1854–1928*, M. Ruas (trans.) (Lisboa: Editorial Estampa Lda., 2 Volumes, 3rd Edition, 2000), 71–72, 331–348, 356–359, 367–370, 376–379, 390–400; M. Newitt, *A History of Mozambique* (London: Hurst and Co., 1995).

nineteenth centuries.[20] These settlements maintained close relationships with Kilwa, Zanzibar, Melinde and Mombasa, as well as the Comoro Islands and north-western Madagascar. The Portuguese settled on the Quirimba archipelago after the conquest of the Ibo Island in 1522, out of desire to control the gold trade coming from the Great Zimbabwe and Mwenemotapa kingdoms to Kilwa via Sofala, which was dominated by the Swahili.

The mainland of Cabo Delgado was gradually populated by farming communities who migrated to the region in various waves over centuries. The Makhuwa seem to have been the first Bantu-speaking people to occupy the region, probably between the eighth and the twelfth centuries.[21] Currently, they are part of a cultural continuum that extends from the Zambezi to the Rovuma rivers and constitute the vast majority of the population of Cabo Delgado. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, an expansion of the Maravi peoples, centred around Lake Niassa, took place, overwhelming some Makhuwa on their way to the coast. Possibly as a result of this migration, the ancestors of the people who are known as Makonde moved into Cabo Delgado between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries.[22] The name 'Makonde' refers to the fertile highlands on which these people settled, known as the Makonde plateau or, more recently, the Mueda plateau. Both the Makhuwa and the Makonde have been matrilineal and had lived in independent hamlets without centralised authority until about the eighteenth century.

From the mid-eighteenth century, economic and social relations on the coast of Mozambique underwent dramatic transformations, which were influenced by the increasing demand for slaves both in the New World as well as the Indian Ocean plantations, especially those of the French, such as in Mascarene islands. Many slaves were taken from northern Mozambique, including Cabo Delgado. The trade picked up in the nineteenth century as a consequence of British abolitionist campaigns and the prohibition of the slave trade in the Americas.[23] Several waves of drought as well as migrations of the Nguni people from Southern Africa – who branched out as a result of the formation of the Zulu kingdom – further complicated the situation of local populations. The slave routes went through the rivers as well as by land, and were dominated mainly by the Yao and the Sultanate of Angoche. The Matambwe people, who lived along the Rovuma river valley, were all but annihilated in the process. The Makonde refused conversion to Islam and entrenched themselves in the plateau that bears their name, becoming a pole of attraction for slave refugees and assuming *de facto* a maroon identity.[24] Cabo Delgado would remain a hotspot of illegal traffic until the beginning of the twentieth century.

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20 R. D. Teixeira, *Northern Mozambique in the Swahili World* (Central Board of National Antiquities, Sweden. Eduardo Mondlane University, Mozambique and Uppsala University, Sweden, 1993).

21 E. Medeiros, 'Etnias e etnicidades em Moçambique: Notas para o estudo da formação de entidades tribais e étnicas entre os povos de língua(s) emakhuwa e elómwè e advento da etnicidade macua e lómuè', *Africana*, 10, 1997, 81–105.

22 See P. Israel, 'The History of the Makonde of Mozambique', *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of African History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024–). Article published 20 March 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.1025.

23 On slavery in Cabo Delgado, see E. Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves in East-Central Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1975); E. Medeiros, *As Etapas da Escravatura no Norte de Moçambique* (Maputo: Arquivo Histórico de Moçambique, 1988).

24 See Israel, 'The History of the Makonde'.

By the end of the nineteenth century there were several Swahili micro-states along the Cabo Delgado coast, whose rulers maintained an official correspondence with the Portuguese administration in Kiswahili or Kimwani *ajami* (Arabic script). Their ruling dynasties claimed the ownership of land, territory and related spirits through their mythical first-comer status as the founders of the kingdoms, while their Shirazi traditions connected them to the broader Swahili World and the Indian Ocean rim.[25] All of them asserted to be subjects of the Sultanate of Zanzibar, but at least one, the Sultanate of Tungui, was in fact an official constituent of the Sultanate of Zanzibar until the end of the nineteenth century.[26]

The influence of the Portuguese over the African population, especially on the mainland, remained faint until 1840, when the Military District of Cabo Delgado was created. Colonial occupation of Cabo Delgado took place following the 1884–1885 Berlin Conference.[27] However, the Portuguese state had little financial means to manage the territory and in 1891 conceded it to a chartered company called *Companhia do Nyassa*. This company controlled the area of contemporary Niassa and Cabo Delgado provinces, from which it extracted wealth through brutal methods of forced labour and punitive taxes levied from the native African population. The company also pushed for a bloody conquest of the interior, which lasted until 1921 when the last nucleus of resistance to colonial encroachments, the Makonde Plateau, was subdued.

The conquest was followed by the establishment of Portuguese administration, still characterised by brutality and arbitrarinesses towards Africans. Forced labor, direct taxation and physical punishments of Africans were incorporated into the 1899, 1904, 1928 and 1930 laws. The administrative reform of 1907 laid the foundations of the system known as *indigenato,* distinguishing between African and European legal rights and civil states – a system that remained intact until 1961. In 1929, the Nyassa Company's mandate came to an end, and the authoritarian Portuguese state took over. The *Estado Novo* (1926–1974), driven by intense nationalism, upheld Catholic faith as a crucial marker of Portuguese national identity. From 1930 to the 1950s, the regime relied on Catholic missions to provide Africans with education leading to their 'civilisation', 'Portugalisation' and Christianisation. This policy had a significant impact on the Makonde, many of whom converted to Christianity and successfully attended mission schools. At the same time, it drew much hostility from Muslims, who resisted sending their children to Catholic schools, where they allegedly were converted to Christianity, fed pork and learned catechesis. Thus, the chasm between mostly Christian inland Makonde and the Muslim coastal Mwani and other Muslims of Cabo Delgado – including the Yao and Muslim Makhuwa – grew wider and deeper.

Even though it was geographically marginal in colonial Mozambique, Cabo Delgado came to occupy a central role in the national liberation. A strong impulse for

25 A. R. de Conceição, *Entre o mar e a terra: situações identitárias do Norte de Moçambique (Cabo Delgado)* (Maputo: Promédia, 2006).
26 E. Rzewuski, 'Origins of the Tungi Sultanate (Northern Mozambique) in the light of local traditions' in S. Pilaszewicz & E. Rzewuski (eds), *Unwritten Testimonies of the African Past* (Warsaw, 1992).
27 Pélissier, *História de Moçambique: Formação e Oposição, 1854–1928*.

the generation of anti-colonial resistance movements was provided by the massive labour migration into Tanganyika, which intensified from the 1930s onwards, mostly to work on sisal plantations.[28] In the 1950s, Mozambican migrants in Tanganyika, spurred by the example of Julius Nyerere's TANU, came together to form mutual help organisations that soon morphed into anti-colonial resistance parties. The leaders of two of these organisations gave the impulsion to the event that marked a crucial political watershed: the Mueda massacre, in which the Portuguese shot against an unarmed crowd that had come to demonstrate for independence.[29] When the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) was created in 1962, it could count on massive popular support established by the Mozambique African National Union (MANU), among other movements. For this as well as geographical reasons – especially the proximity with Tanganyika – Cabo Delgado turned into the main battlefield of the ten-year anticolonial guerrilla war (1964–1974) waged against Portuguese colonialism. While the Makonde constituted a large proportion of Frelimo's footsoldiers, the coastal Muslims also participated in the struggle, often being sidelined by a secular or Christian leadership.[30] Throughout the war, Frelimo kept its central operative base in the province, which was also the theatre of internal strife between various factions of the liberation movement, especially during the 1968–1969 crisis known as the 'struggle of the two lines'. Methods of re-education, collective execution and punishment of the political dissidents, which all turned into a postcolonial policy of the Frelimo party, were also piloted in Cabo Delgado during the liberation war.

In the post-independence period, Cabo Delgado became not only the symbolic cradle of the liberation struggle, but also a testing ground for the socialist revolution spearheaded by Frelimo. The project of socialist villagisation was implemented here with an unmatched vigour. As people were forced to relocate into large communal villages, the social landscape of Cabo Delgado was massively transformed. Communal villages were also the hub of various forms of revolutionary violence, on which Frelimo built its ruling. While Frelimo became a cornerstone of Makonde identity, the Mwani were further marginalised due to the erroneous perception of not partaking in the liberation struggle. Under Frelimo tutelage, former Makonde guerrilla leaders came to dominate the political and economic life of the province.

The civil war expanded into Cabo Delgado in the early 1980s. As elsewhere in the country, Renamo recurred to atrocious violence against civilians, targeting especially the symbols of Frelimo's political power, such as communal villages and revolutionary authority, leading to the disruption of infrastructure and social life as well as mass

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28 E Alpers, 'To Seek a Better Life: Implications of Migration from Mozambique to Tanganyika for Class Formation and Political Behaviour', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 18, 2, 1984, 367–88. F. Barradas Correia Castro Bastos, 'A fonte dos Wamakonde: Migração laboral, associativismo e anticolonialismo na indústria sisaleira do Tanganyika (1880–1960)' (PhD thesis, University of Campinas, 2022).

29 P. Israel, 'The Mueda Massacre Retold: The "Matter of Return" in Portuguese Colonial Intelligence', *Journal of Southern African Studies,* 46, 5, 2020, 1009–1036.

30 On ethnic and religious conflict within MANU, see L. Bonate, 'Traditions and Transitions: Islam and Chiefship in Northern Mozambique ca. 1850–1974' (Phd thesis, University of Cape Town, 2007), 212–251. See also, L. Bonate, 'Muslim Memories of the Liberation War in Cabo Delgado', *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 39, 2013, 230–256 and 'Muslims of Northern Mozambique and the Liberation Movements', *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies*, 35, 2, 2009, 280–294.

trauma. Many Makhuwa and Mwani, marginalised in the Frelimo political dispensation, adhered to Renamo and took up arms against the regime. On the Makonde plateau, on the contrary, the war cemented the Frelimo's hold and militarised social life, establishing local militias alongside the army.

The signing of peace accords in 1992 was a significant break in a series of cycles of violence starting from the eighteenth century: from slavery to colonial brutality, from liberation struggle to a prolonged civil war. Unfortunately, this respite did not last long. The first decade of peace was marked by economic expansion, especially in agriculture and tourism, but also in illicit trade of timber, ivory and drugs. During the second decade the discovery of huge mineral resources loom large – gas, rubies and graphite – soon overshadowed by an economic depression caused by the 'hidden debt' scandal. The scars of violence periodically reopened, especially in the aftermath of elections, among which the 2000 rebellion at Montepuez resulting in the violent death of fifty inmates by asphyxiation and the 2005 communal riots at Mocímboa da Praia, which pitted Mwani against Makonde.[31] Today, the people of Cabo Delgado wonder in songs about the curse that befell their province, the only in the country to have suffered three wars in the space of fifty years.[32]

Beyond easy binaries: understanding conflict in Cabo Delgado

The eruption of a new war in northern Mozambique has attracted the attention of scholars, journalists, NGO practitioners and security pundits, often with little or no previous research experience in the country, let alone Cabo Delgado. In the first two years of the insurgency, analysts broadly split into two camps. The one highlighted the local nature of the insurgency, explaining it as a youth uprising against a corrupt government in the context of unbridled capitalist extraction, while downplaying the connections with international jihadi networks, and casting doubt upon the relevance of the religious factor altogether. The most vocal proponent of this viewpoint was Joseph Hanlon, a former Frelimo supporter and development scholar, who highlighted exclusively the internal dimensions of the conflict, brushing aside the religious one, which he considered as a mere vector for local political and economic grievances. Hanlon's work about illegal flow of drugs in the north of Mozambique, with linkages to the ruling party elite,[33] has informed subsequent publications on the connections of the insurgency with organised crime.[34] While not denying the role of international capital in breeding malcontent among the youths, the other camp attributed a considerable importance to the agency of the Islamist networks in Africa and beyond, especially those influenced by the jihadist movements and radi-

31 See respectively P. Nacuo, *Caso Montepuez: Grande Reportagem* (Maputo, Mozambique: Noticias, 2001) and A. M. Santos, 'Violence, Rumor, and Elusive Trust in Mocímboa da Praia, Mozambique', *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology*, 65, 3, 2021, 44–66.

32 Songs recorded by Paolo Israel in Pemba, September 2023.

33 J. Hanlon, 'The Uberization of Mozambique's Heroin Trade', *London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)*, Working Paper Series, No. 18–190, 2018.

34 See for example, L. Mapfumo, 'The Nexus Between Violent Extremism and the Illicit Economy in Northern Mozambique: Is Mozambique Under Siege from International Organised Crime?' in *Extremisms in Africa and Extremisms in Africa*, A. Tschudin et al. (eds) (Tracey Macdonald Publishers, 2019), III, 96–117.

cal clerics from Kenya and Tanzania. The most important publication in this respect was the report by Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira, based on field research carried out in Mocímboa da Praia.[35] The debate between these two positions – the internalist and the other externalist – occurred in a context of a general dearth of information. Studies based on first-hand evidence were few and far between, due to both the inaccessibility of the war zones and the curtailing of information on the part of the Mozambican government. Often, speculative journalism and conspiracy theories held sway.[36]

The situation changed significantly in the second half of 2019, with the insurgents' allegiance to the Islamic State. This made it hard to dismiss the role of religious ideology, even though several commentators still considered radical Islam as a mere rallying banner for socio-economic demands or a smokescreen altogether. Paradoxically, the insurgent's military successes created opportunities for research among internally displaced people. It soon became clear that the inroads made by radical Islam could not be written off as a mere epiphenomenon of economic factors. The most revealing source in this respect were the testimonies of abducted women, collected and interpreted by sociologist João Feijó.[37] These suggested that the movement housed factions with diverging agendas and different levels of investment; and that while the majority of its leaders embraced a jihadist ideology steeped in the discourse of the Islamic State, many rank-and-file insurgents were driven by the prospect of immediate financial gain, retaliation against State violence, sheer desperation, or the lure of a life of banditry. The role of State repression in fuelling disaffection was highlighted by several reports. Overall, these studies demonstrated the acute inadequacy of the internal–external dichotomy, which had already plagued the debate about the nature of the Mozambican civil war.[38]

Among the most important of these publications is the report by Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira, the first empirically-grounded research conducted in Mocímboa da Praia in late 2017 and early 2018, before the area came under a strict surveillance.[39] The research focused on the origins of the group, its nature, financing mechanisms and reach. This blueprint would serve as the basis for many of the studies that followed, especially those that tried to understand the religious underpinnings of the movement. The authors identified three core reasons that led the youths to join the insurgency: a) poverty, unemployment and low literacy; b) personal fan-

35 S. Habibe, S. Forquilha and J. Pereira, 'Islamic Radicalization in Northern Mozambique', *Cadernos IESE*, 17, 2019, 1–37, https://www.iese.ac.mz/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/cadernos_17.pdf .

36 The Mozambican public sphere was especially rife with conspiracy theories. At various points several actors were identified as culprits. Among them were security companies, the CIA, the oil and gas companies, former president Armando Emilio Guebuza, who would have wanted to derail the oil to damage president Nyusi, and the Makonde big men, who would benefit from the war economy and land dispossession, or even pursued plans for an independent Cabo Delgado. For a review of various conspiracy theories, see F. A. Dos Santos, 'War in resource-rich northern Mozambique – Six scenarios', *CMI Insight,* 2, May 2020, 1–18.

37 J. Feijó, 'Caracterização e Organização Social dos Machababos a partir dos discursos de mulheres raptadas', *Observador Rural*, 109, April 2021, 1–23, https://omrmz.org/wp-content/uploads/OR-109-Caracterização-e-organização-social-dos-Machababos.pdf. English version: https://omrmz.org/wp-content/uploads/OR-109-Characterization-and-social-organizacion-of-Machababos.pdf.

38 For a critique of the dichotomy, see especially Y. Adam, *Escapar aos Dentes do Crocodilo e Cair na Boca do Leopardo: Trajectoria de Moçambique Pós-colonial, 1975–1990* (Maputo: Promedia, 2006).

39 Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira, 'Islamic Radicalization in Northern Mozambique'. The authors are affiliated with the Islamic Council of Mozambique, the Institute for Economic and Social Studies (IESE) and the MASC Foundation, respectively.

tasies, thirst for adventure and camaraderie, and the desire of creating a new social order; and c) ethnicity-based identity issues. They also alluded to the connections between local networks and regional ones, especially with the Great Lakes, Kenya and Tanzania, often via marriage. The study highlighted the importance of funding from illicit trade, namely timber, rubies and ivory, but also charcoal. In a subsequent study, Forquilha and Pereira argued that internal and external migration pathways in northern Mozambique – facilitated by a porous border with Tanzania – and fishing and trade activity across the Cabo Delgado archipelagos and islands provided an important avenue for recruitment.[40] This reinforced the hypothesis that the recruitment pool of the insurgents is especially located in the coastal districts of Cabo Delgado.

Another researcher from IESE, Sérgio Chichava, explored the identities and biographies of the insurgents as well as State representations. The official narrative, he argued, pointed to a 'faceless enemy', ranging from 'individuals whose goal is to set up an Islamic state' to 'former *garimpeiros* (illegal miners) from the Montepuez ruby mines', as well as to a 'group of Mozambican business people living in Beira' (in central Mozambique) and finally, to 'outside forces', particularly those linked to the ADF rebel forces operating in the northern Kivu province of the DRC.[41] In practice, however, the insurgents were not faceless at all. Indeed, in subsequent studies, Chichava sketched a number of short biographies of insurgents, providing a glimpse into their motivations and social background.[42] Chichava suggested that the coastal district of Mucojo in Macomia district was the heartland of the insurgency.

In a publication based on interviews carried out in 2019, Eric Morier-Genoud suggested an alternative place of origin for the insurgency – the district of Balama in the south of the province.[43] According to this interpretation, the insurgency sprung from a 'sect' that existed in that district a decade prior to the attacks on Mocímboa. The argument for the link between this early 'sect' and the insurgents is based on the similarity of the attire such as knee-length pants different from that of surrounding Muslim communities. Morier-Genoud also claims that the Balama 'sect' was a literal interpreter of the Quran scriptures and prayed only three times a day, as opposed to the standard five times followed by Sunni Muslims. This group would have shifted to armed jihadism in the mid-2010s, entering mosques with shoes and armed with knives. Both the matter of attire and the interpretation of this group as being Quranist, however, are disputed by Liazzat Bonate, who pointed out that when Muslims declare jihad, they are religiously authorised to pray fewer times, carry weapons, enter mosques in shoes and wear shortened and tighter trousers because of their status as

40 S. Forquilha and J. Pereira, 'Migration Dynamics and the Making of the Jihadi Insurgency in Northern Mozambique', *E-JPH*, 20, 2, 2022.

41 Chichava, 'Who is "the enemy" attacking Cabo Delgado?'.

42 S. Chichava, 'As primeiras caras do "Al-Shabaab" em Cabo Delgado: O caso de André Idrissa em Cogolo', *Boletim IDeIAS*, 134P, May 2023, 1–2; 'Os primeiros sinais do Al-Shabaab em Cabo Delgado: Algumas histórias de Macomia e Ancuabe', *Boletim IDeIAS*, 129, April 2020, 1–2; 'Jorginho. Brief history of a Makonde Muslim from Cabo Delgado', *Boletim IDeIAS*, 151E, April 2023, 1–2; 'Muamudo Saha and the "holy" war against "the pigs": the initial stage of the insurgency in Cabo Delgado', *Boletim IDeIAS*, 152E, May 2023, 1–2.

43 E. Morier-Genoud, 'The Jihadi Insurgency in Mozambique: Origins, Nature and Beginning', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 14, 3, 2020, 396–412. This article was republished with minor modifications as the last chapter of the book *Towards Jihad? Muslims and Politics in Postcolonial Mozambique* (London: Hurst, 2023).

warriors, much like the members of the Balama group.[44] The connections between the Balama group and the *mashababe* leadership – which is demonstrably rooted in coastal Cabo Delgado, especially Mucojo and Mocímboa – are still not clear.

Researchers form the *Organização do Meio Rural* (OMR), Joao Feijó and Jerry Maquenzi, have produced the richest empirical work to date, based on material coming from the districts in conflict as well as testimonies from internally displaced persons. Feijó in particular has established himself as the leading scholar on the war. In a seminal piece, Feijó highlights the role of women in the insurgency, as well as the internal hierarchy of the insurgents' camps.[45] Women, he argues, participate as spies and mobilisers, and undertake indoctrination, even in military missions. They also suffer immense violence, from both the insurgents and the military. Many are raped or forcefully married, though some might have married the insurgents voluntarily. Some of the abducted are possibly trafficked.[46] Although they recognise the religious dimension of the conflict, Maquenzi and Feijó also explore its internal drivers, namely frustrated expectations, perceptions of discrimination, and state violence, as well as the impact of the resettlements resulting from the extractive industry interests, which increased land disputes, reduced revenues and income opportunities.[47]

Locally-based empirical work has been carried out by researchers affiliated to the Rovuma University located in Cabo Delgado. Particularly important is the description of the initial attacks through the voices of the people of Mocímboa da Praia, edited by Geraldo Macalane and Jafar Jafar.[48] Like others before them, these authors look into the origins of the groups and their networks within the communities, describing insurgents as home-grown and embedded. They also present evidence on the role of children, youths and the elderly in the insurgency, describe the insurgents' previous employment and other activities, their social messages and positive responses to these messages from local populations.

The bulk of research produced around the conflict in Cabo Delgado is, however, framed in the paradigm of security studies, relying on concepts such as Violent Extremism (VE) and Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE), and steeped in the global discourse on the War on Terror. Authors who operate within this paradigm often have a limited contextual knowledge of Cabo Delgado and little appreciation for historical particularities and nuances. Many of these analysts have difficulty in reading local sources and discussions in Portuguese. One such example is the work of Heyen-Dubé and Rands, who conclude their article by stating that the insurgents of Cabo Delgado cannot be linked to global Salafi-Jihadism, because they differ in their ideological and theological understanding of the world. Rather, the insurgents would aim to challenge the existing socio-political order, to increase political and religious representation, as well as to reap socio-economic benefits from the economic investments

44 See Bonate's review of Morier-Genoud's book in this special issue.
45 Feijó, 'Caracterização e Organização Social dos Machababos'.
46 J. Feijó, *The Role of Women in the Conflict in Cabo Delgado: Understanding Vicious Cycles of Violence (*Dakar: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2021).
47 J. Maquenzi and J. Feijó, *Pobreza, Desigualdades e Conflitos no Norte de Cabo Delgado* (OMR, 2019).
48 G. L. Macalane and J. S. Jafar, *Ataques Terroristas em Cabo Delgado (2017–2020): as causas do fenómeno pela boca da população de Mocímboa da Praia* (Pemba: Universidade Rovuma, 2021).

in the area.[49] The claim of the lack of links to global jihadism does not seem to be supported by evidence. Even when they can read the sources in Portuguese, scholars influenced by the security paradigm tend to overemphasise the external influences, especially the connections with ISIS, to the detriment of internal dynamics. The most striking example of this tendency in the popular domain is the book written by Portuguese right-wing political commentator, Nuno Rogerio, who publicly advocated for EU intervention in Mozambique.[50]

A great number of NGO reports has been produced on the war in Cabo Delgado. Some, especially from Amnesty International, the International Crisis Group (ICG) and the Mozambican Centre for Development and Democracy (CDD), have been crucial in exposing the human rights abuses arising from the conflict. Amnesty's report was pivotal to give credibility to the horrific killing by soldiers of the Mozambican army of a naked woman at the Awassi crossing. The Amnesty researchers used geotriangulation to pinpoint the exact place of the occurrence. These reports condemn the indiscriminate violence against civilians, perpetrated by insurgents, Mozambican defence forces and private military contractors.[51] From 2021, the CDD focused on the themes of conflict resolution and prevention of violent extremism, strongly embedded in a security framework paradigm, contemplating the possibility of negotiations as a solution to the conflict.[52] With the expansion of the conflict to previously safe areas, in 2023, the CDD reported on the escalating violence and denounced the lack of coordination between the humanitarian, development and peace sectors.[53] While initially critical of the opaque terms for the presence of the agreements with the Rwandan force, CDD is currently monitoring the withdrawal of the SAMIM contingent and the resurgence of the conflict. Moreover, they too denounced violence against civilians and insurgents by the Mozambican defence and the newly constituted *Força Local* (the local community-based forces). The two reports by ICG are among the most articulate and multifaceted interventions on the insurgency to have been produced in the consultancy sector.[54]

Analyses on the foreign military intervention in the conflict are relatively recent. Bussotti and Coimbra's work is a reference on the matter. Contrasting with the positive and efficient image of the Rwandan forces, these authors expose the limitations of the SADC intervention, particularly the lack of cohesion between the contributing countries. This, they argue, could make Mozambique a new stage of proxy

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49 T. Heyen-Dubé and R. Rands, 'Evolving Doctrine and Modus Operandi: Violent Extremism in Cabo Delgado', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 33, 3, 2022, 437–66.

50 N. Rogeiro, *O Cabo Do Medo: O Daesh Em Moçambique (2019–2020)* (Lisbon: D. Quixote, 2020).

51 'Mozambique: Civilians Killed as War Crimes Committed by Armed Group, Government Forces, and Private Military Contractors – New Report', *Amnesty International*, 2021, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/03/mozambique-civilians-killed-as-war-crimes-committed-by-armed-group-government-forces-and-private-military-contractors-new-report/ (accessed 17 May 2024).

52 'Negociar com Extremistas Violentos em Cabo Delgado – Centro Para Democracia e Direitos Humanos. Série de Resolução de Conflitos (Número 5)' (CDD, 2021), https://cddmoz.org/negociar-com-extremistas-violentos-em-cabo-delgado/.

53 'Response to violent extremism in northern Mozambique: lack of coordination between humanitarian, development, and peace sectors', 2023, https://cddmoz.org/response-to-violent-extremism-in-northern-mozambique-lack-of-coordination-between-humanitarian-development-and-peace-sectors-2/.

54 Crisis Group, 'Stemming the Insurrection in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado', *Africa Report*, 303, 11 June 2021, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/southern-africa/mozambique/303-stemming-insurrection-mozambiques-cabo-delgado; Crisis Group, 'Winning Peace in Mozambique's Embattled North', *Crisis Group Africa Briefing*, 178, Maputo/Nairobi/Brussels, 10 February 2022, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/southern-africa/mozambique/winning-peace-mozambiques-embattled-north.

war, this time between 'the West, led by the United States, and Islamic radicalism'.[55] Journalist Borges Nhamirre, affiliated with the Institute of Security Studies (ISS) and CIP (Centre for Public Integrity), has published several analyses on the opacity of the agreement regarding the presence of Rwandan forces, as well as on the ineffective strategies of the Mozambican government in dealing with the insurgency.[56]

The existing literature hints at the multiple angles from which to make sense of this war, requiring a multi-layered and nuanced approach. We have identified several important prisms to study the war, such as perceived discrimination and exclusion linked to religious and ethnic identities and transnational networks, the state violence and extractive economies, youth bulge and waithood, and the gender dimension, including gendered violence.

Cabo Delgado in the global picture

The conflict in Cabo Delgado is perceived by several authors to be linked to transnational jihadism, especially after the affiliation of the insurgents to the IS in 2019.[57] Transnational jihadism is a type of violent activism which, in terms of its ideology, aims to mobilise Muslims around the world to restore an alleged rigorous conception of the political and religious order of the early days of Islam. This jihadism has an inherently 'glocal' (global-local) character of resistance; that is, although jihadists oppose local states on the basis of their grievances, they simultaneously rebel against the international order of Western hegemony. Thus, transnational jihadism is a movement as much about national identity and its imagined community as it is about religion and faith. Contemporary jihadism emerged from movements and ideologies that scholars have grouped into the concept of 'Islamism'.[58] Islamism does not mean Islam as a religion and faith, but rather refers to attempts to articulate Islam into a political order in response to the West, which is perceived to control the wealth of Muslim countries governed by allegedly corrupt and ineffective governments. This, according to Islamist activists, keeps the majority of the world's Muslim population poor, unemployed and without civil and human rights. The more recent jihadism has been influenced by the Islamist elites exiled to Saudi Arabia in the 1980s,[59] and later by the ideologues of al-Qaeda and IS, who espouse, besides the idea of jihad against the so-called *kafirun* (Arabic, pl., from *kafir*, non-believer) divided into 'far enemy' (the West) and 'near enemies' (the local, often nominally Muslim, governments, as well as Christians and followers of other religions, atheists and Muslims who are

55 L. Bussotti Luca and E. J. Coimbra, 'Struggling the Islamic State in Austral Africa: The SADC military intervention in Cabo Delgado (Mozambique) and its limits', *Frontiers in Political Science*, 5, 2023, 1–8, 1.

56 https://issafrica.org/author/borges-nhamirre.

57 Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira, 'Islamic Radicalization'; Morier-Genoud, 'The Jihadi Insurgency'; Macalane and Jafar, *Ataques Terroristas em Cabo Delgado;* International Crisis Group, 'Stemming the Insurrection in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado', https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/southern-africa/mozambique/303-stemming-insurrection-mozambiques-cabo-delgado.

58 F. A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 30–31; B. Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism: Political Islam and the New World Disorder* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 5; S. J. Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005–2012* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7, 31, 59–67, 74; P. Mandaville, *Islam and Politics* (2ª ed., London: Routledge, 2014), 46–51.

59 Mandaville, *Islam and Politics*, 50, 99–101; T. Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 60.

Sufi, secular, or moderate). Transnational jihadism consists of many groups that differ from each other, sometimes substantially, but they all express the conviction that current circumstances make a violent struggle or a jihad an individual duty of all Muslims.

As elsewhere, in Cabo Delgado, the jihadist violence seems to have been triggered by a complex combination of local and often situational factors, such as historical grievances and the perceived economic and social injustices, marginalisation and insecurity, which the state not only has failed to address but it used its repressive machinery to aggravate the existing grievances even further.[60] Thus, while the ideology is important for the leaders in order to recruit followers, the followers might be driven by different motivating factors of social, psychological, practical and political character. For example, in the case of Boko Haram, the deprivation and lack of access to state services in the northern Nigerian Borno and Kano States have been strong drivers for people to join the group, even if some might not share the Islamist ideals of its leadership.[61] The group became even more radical following the excessive militarised responses by the Nigerian state. Similarly, in Niger, jihadist mobilisation among the Fulani resulted from direct and indirect State abuses, perceptions of marginalisation and discrimination, devastating economic conditions and lack of employment opportunities.[62] In Kenya's North–East and coastal regions, Al-Shabaab claimed to 'liberate' surrounding Muslim lands from non-Muslim 'occupation' and avenging historical injustices.[63] The 2011 incursions of Kenya and African Union Mission to Somalia appear to have hastened a shift within Al-Shabaab's leadership from a predominantly Somali nationalist to a more internationalist jihadist orientation. Socio-economic grievances, land-use rights, a lack of opportunities for the youths, and ethnic or religious hostility towards a politically and economically dominant group in addition to repressive and discriminatory state policies and actions were important factors that drove many Kenyans to Al-Shabaab and its affiliate group al-Hijra.[64] Also, many recruits join for money or for the lack of other opportunities.

These conflicts 'may take the guise of traditional nationalism, tribalism or religious fundamentalism', but are actually the result of the weakening of the state under the pressure of globalisation.[65] The Mozambican state has been further weakened by the 'hidden debt' scandal but also by the expansion of the extractive industry into Cabo Delgado, where rubies, graphite, coal, phosphate, sapphires and hardwood, began to be exploited by multinational companies when in 2010 large deposits of

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60 A. Glazzard, S. Jesperson, T. Maguire and E. Winterbotham, 'Islamist Violent Extremism: A New Form of Conflict or Business as Usual', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 6, 1, 2017, 13, http://doi.org/10.5334/sta.503; G. Ganiel, 'Religion & security: Can religion contribute to peace and reconciliation?' in J Wolffe and G. Moorhead (eds), *Religion, Security and Global Uncertainties* (Milton Keynes: Open University, 2014).

61 F. Onuoha, 'The Islamist challenge: Nigeria's Boko Haram crisis explained', *African Security Review*, 19, 2, 2010, 54–67, https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2010.503061; V. Comolli, *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist insurgency* (London: Hurst, 2015).

62 L. Raineri, 'Explaining the Rise of Jihadism in Africa: The Crucial Case of the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1828078.

63 D. M. Anderson and J. McKnight, 'Kenya at war: Al Shabaab and its enemies in East Africa', *African Affairs*, 114, 454, 2015, 1–27, https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adu082.

64 A. Botha, 'Radicalisation to terrorism in Kenya and Uganda: A political socialisation perspective', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9, 5, 2015, 2–14.

65 Glazzard, Jesperson, Maguire and Winterbotham, 'Islamist Violent Extremism'; M. Kaldor, *New and old wars: Organized violence in a global era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 73.

natural gas were also found. Carmody argues that 'neoliberalism, the synthesis of "free market" economics and liberal democratic theory, has been the dominant force in African political economies during the last three decades'.[66] Neoliberal economic policies, promoted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that imposed Structural Adjustment Programs on the so-called developing world from the late 1980s onwards, have shown unable to revamp economies and generate much-needed employment; moreover, they exacerbated job losses in the private and public sectors, and drove more people to the informal economy. The state has shrunk social services and now dispenses minimal and largely inadequate education, healthcare and security. Pressured to rely on cheap, flexible, disposable labor, it has stopped acting as a job provider. During this period, neoliberalism has not reversed, but has arguably deepened Africa's marginalisation in the global economy. Carmody points out that neoliberalism's disastrous economic record in Africa has fed different types of insecurity on the continent, including human and national security problems, as regionalised poverty may fuel irredentism, which feeds 'poor governance' and 'war economies'[67].

Reno was one of the first academics to point out how the private commercial transactions of the new mining industry have undermined the purpose of the state in Africa.[68] He argues that because of the 'weak states' in many mineral producing African countries, combined with the new trend of foreign companies, the mineral resource economy has to a large extent become separated economically, socially and geographically from other sectors of the national economy. Watts and Ferguson underscore the contested territoriality of the postcolonial nation-state whereby resources act as conduits for deeper struggles over territory, sovereignty and citizenship.[69] In the Cabo Delgado insurgency, ethnic Mwani claim the islands and the coast where the inshore and offshore gas industry is being set up, as their ancestral land. The implementation of this industry has been mired in controversy because of alleged clientelism, lack of structural transformation, and growing inequality. Local people were purportedly consulted and compensated for the loss of land, but this was contested by the population whose protests were violently crushed by the state and private security apparatus. The popular perceptions of despondency in Cabo Delgado were aggravated further by the belief that most jobs in the new industry went to the outsiders instead of local youth. This perceived social exclusion appears to be the most important contributor to the emergence of the insurgency.[70] Similar grievances were articulated by the youths in the regions of the world where a large-scale extractive industry operates.

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66 C. Pádraig, *Neoliberalism, Civil Society and Security in Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1–2.
Carmody, *Neoliberalism*, 3

67 Carmody, *Neoliberalism*, 3.

68 W. Reno, 'How sovereignty matters: international markets and the political economy of local politics in weak states' in T. Callaghy, R. Kassimir and R. Latham (eds), *Intervention & Transnationalism in Africa: Global-Local Networks of Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 197–215.

69 M. Watts, 'Resource curse? governmentality, oil and power in the Niger Delta, Nigeria', *Geopolitics*, 9, 1, 2004, 50–80, 53; J. Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), Chapter 8.

70 Maquenzi and Feijó, *Pobreza, Desigualdades e Conflitos*; International Crisis Group, 'Stemming the Insurrection'.

The youths are recognised as the protagonist of the Cabo Delgado insurgency. This is reflected in the name of their movement, *ash-Shabab*, meaning 'the youths' in Arabic.[71] The youth component is prominent in many radical Islamist organisations, including ISIS, Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda, al-Hijra and others. With most Sub-Saharan countries marked by high birth rates and young populations but deteriorating economies, youths have been finding it ever harder to gain access to educational facilities, employment and social advancement and political representation. Competition for jobs, schooling and privilege marks relations between different generations and has, concomitantly, become a factor in post-colonial political systems and in several violent revolts emerging as a result of blocked mobility or political communication within those systems. High levels of youth unemployment are a key issue in the contemporary neoliberal context, and a large population of young people in Sub-Saharan Africa are said to be unable to transition to adulthood, despite their biological age, due to the lack of social mobility and employment which preclude them from marrying and becoming autonomous.[72] They are considered living in *waithood,* that is, waiting, hoping and expecting their turn to become adults. Honwana maintains that 'they are forced to live in a liminal, neither-here-nor-there state; they are no longer children who require care, yet they are not yet considered mature social adults… Young people in waithood are increasingly unable to become social adults and full-fledged citizens.'[73] As Masquelier puts it, 'rather than constituting the transitional phase leading to adulthood, youth is often an indefinitely expandable life stage, affected by political instability, economic decline and shrinking aspirations'.[74] Frustrated, poor and non-elite youths struggle to reach culturally recognised adulthood and therefore seeks validation by joining extremist groups, which gives them a sense of adult status through responsibility, purpose and financial compensation.[75]

In Africa, minority conflicts have often been animated by resource competition, especially when ethno-territorial constituencies, such as Cabo Delgado's coastal areas, where natural gas is located, have not been the key beneficiaries of state allocational decisions, and state-based local or regional administrations serving as agencies for distributing economic benefits are not comprised of the ethnic minority who claim the ownership of the resource soil.[76] The minority group perceptions as suffering at the hands of a dominant group that controls the state and monopolises the instruments of power, achieved by subverting democratic processes, leads to violent social tensions, insurgencies, and even civil war.

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71 While many spell this as *Al-Shabab*, a number of interviewees in Pemba referred to *Ash-Shabab* as the correct name of the group. See Bonate's contribution in this issue.

72 A. Honwana, *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa* (Sterling, Virginia: Kumarian Press, 2012), Chapter, 2.

73 Honwana, *The Time of Youth,* 4.

74 A. Masquelier, *Fada: Boredom and Belonging in Niger* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 13.

75 D. Byman, *Al Qaeda, The Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 149–152, 210; L. E. Asuelime and J. D. Ojochenemi, *Boko Haram: The Socio-Economic Drivers* (Heidelberg, New York, Dordrecht, London: Springer, 2015), Chapter 5.

76 See for instance A. Zalik, 'The Niger Delta: "Petro Violence" and "Partnership Development"', *Review of African Political Economy*, 31, 101, 2004, 401–424; C. Greiner, 'Guns, land, and votes: Cattle Rustling and the Politics of Boundary (re)making in Northern Kenya', *African Affairs*, 112, 447, April 2013, 216–23.

A history of a troubled present

This special issue on the war in Cabo Delgado – the first of its kind – aims to bring historical and ethnographic depth to the study of a conflict of a new kind in the African continent. This seemed to us sorely needed in a context in which the events in the province have been largely apprehended in the frame of consultancy reports or security studies. The opportunity for this endeavour was provided by a research project based at the Chr. Michelsen Institute, which had as core partners the *Observatório do Meio Rural* (OMR) in Mozambique, the University of the Western Cape in South Africa and the University of Bergen in Norway. While largely the product of the intellectual exchanges and research endeavours carried out in the context of this project, this special issue also reached out to several other researchers, especially Mozambican, to create a broad tapestry of interventions.

There are obvious epistemological risks in engaging in a history of a close and unfinished past, especially the risk of presentism and of succumbing to the security and consultancy language that has dominated the debate on the insurgency in Cabo Delgado. In order to avoid this, we tried to steer the contributions towards historical and ethnographic depth and reflexivity. The overall aim of this issue is to draw together a series of layered interventions that bring to the fore the multi-faceted nature of the events, as well as their social and human dimensions, without silencing the voices of the people involved.

As editors, one major challenge that we faced was naming the events in question. Should we keep prudent and label it a 'conflict'? Or else an 'insurgency'? Two considerations pushed us to embrace the more audacious and perhaps contentious term of 'war'. First, this is how people on the ground – the ones who suffer the violence unleashed by the insurgents, the State and the various armed contractors – call it. In Emakhuwa it is *ekhontho*; in Shimakonde *ing'ondo*; in Kimwani *vita*. In testimonies, narratives, songs and other performances, the people of Cabo Delgado unequivocally speak of a 'third war'. Secondly, we heeded Stig Jarle Hansen's persuasive argument that frames African jihadist violence within the paradigm of the 'new wars' – asymmetrical warfare between State and non-State actors which according to Mary Kaldor will increasingly define the post-Cold War landscape.[77] According to Hansen, 'new wars' on the continent have the potential to degenerate in 'forever wars', conflicts that become chronic within the current global conjuncture.[78] To call what is happening in Cabo Delgado 'a war' is to brush aside all denialism that would minimise the violence or attribute it to the misdeeds of 'faceless' enemies or foreign terrorists.[79]

The special issue begins with a section that frames the current conflict in the historical *longue durée*. The first article, by João Feijó and Aslak Orre, provides a general

77 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.
78 S. J. Hansen, '"Forever wars"? Patterns of diffusion and consolidation of Jihadism in Africa', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 3, 3, 2022.
79 In the Mozambican public sphere, appeals to name the conflict in Cabo Delgado a 'war' have also served as dismissive of official State denialism. See for instance A. Nuvunga, 'Cabo Delgado is in war and the province needs to be sealed', https://amp.dw.com/pt-002/cabo-delgado-está-em-guerra-e-a-província-precisa-de-ser-fechada/a-53651447.

overview of the history of extractivism in Cabo Delgado in a perspective informed by political economy. The authors argue that the recent frenzy caused by the discovery of massive natural resources is a development within a very long history; and that Cabo Delgado itself has been shaped as a space by a relentless trajectory of extractivism. A core characteristic of this history of extractivism is the collaboration of local elites with external agents in despoiling local agents of the riches of the land. While the authors do not tackle directly the insurgency, they suggest that this history of extractivism is central to the current developments.

Liazzat Bonate's contribution combines comparative analysis and oral history to provide an in-depth discussion of the religious dimensions of the insurgency. The article begins by establishing the historical backdrop of Islam in Mozambique, both in terms of the marginalisation of Muslim communities and of the local responses to the multiple ways Islamic reforms have affected northern Mozambique throughout the past centuries. Local Muslims, Bonate argues, were not passive recipients, but active interpreters of these waves of reform. The article then discusses in detail a number of testimonies, especially *Shaykhs*, who address the various interpretations of the origins and motives of the insurgents. Not only does this showcase Muslim voices, often marginalised in the literature, but also demonstrates the complex intertwining of local grievances and global politics in the emergence of the insurgency in Cabo Delgado.

The ethno-political fault line between Christian Makonde and Muslim Mwani is often mentioned as one of the aggravating, if not precipitating, factors of the war. In her contribution, Ana Margarida Sousa Santos draws on historical research carried out in Mocímboa da Praia in the aftermath of the 2005 riots, to outline the progressive deepening of the rift between these two ethnicities. At the same time, the respondents whose words the author carefully weaves through the historical reconstruction, highlight how the history of the Makonde and Mwani was shaped by fundamentally similar experiences, and how fluidity and proximity are a characteristic of the ethnic landscape of Cabo Delgado.

The second part of this issue dives into the micro-dynamics of the war, looking especially at the media and the representations of the conflict. The article by Paolo Israel focuses on the use of social media, chiefly WhatsApp and Facebook, to discuss and make sense of the unfolding war, with a special focus on the attacks to the Makonde plateau in 2020. Building on literature on digital militarism, the article demonstrates the continued importance of orality for local people, focussing on the previously unexplored medium of the voice note, deemed to be more trustworthy than images in a context of suspicion and conspiracy theories. At the same time, the article provides a picture from below of the tense relationships between the Mozambican army and the budding militia that would come to be known as *Força Local*.

The photo-essay by Tassiana Tomé and Catarina Trinidade aims at making visible the individual histories of displaced women, which are otherwise hidden behind the dry statistics. Moreover, the photo-essay portrays the women in the way they wish their lives and war stories to be represented. These, Trindade and Tomé argue, reflect

primarily a desire to be seen for their dignity, determination and perseverance, not just simple material needs. Ultimately, these representations exemplify how peace processes could be achieved.

Stig Hansen and Ida Bary's article analyses the coverage of Mozambique in the Islamic State's periodical called *Al-Naba* between 2022 and 2023. The information from the field in Cabo Delgado appears to be fed into the Islamic State propaganda bureau with a marked periodicity. The authors contend that in recent years the Islamic State has been dispensing an increasing importance to Sub-Saharan Africa and Cabo Delgado in its propaganda activities. The Islamic State employs a more traditional anti-colonial trope in its approaches to jihadism and terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa, including Cabo Delgado, but it also uses *al-Naba* as a tool to promote Africa 'successes' as examples to be followed by the jihadists elsewhere.

The third section of this issue considers the dynamics resulting from the displacement and violence in the province. The article by Zacarias Chambe draws on long-term and in-depth fieldwork among communities of internally displaced people in the district of Montepuez, especially in the camp of Nacaca. Written in a language both conceptual and poetic, Chambe takes cue from the threat of violence inscribed on one of the camps – 'Here we discipline, here we punish' – to track how displaced people are located at the crossfire of multiple forms of violence, from the insurgents to the State, which result in their silencing. The article manages to evoke the voice and presence of many of these displaced people, in an intimate and humane way, especially that of a young woman, Amina, inviting the reader to experience the war from their perspective.

The article by Egna Sidumo and Bjørn Enge Bertelsen looks at the links between community cohesion and the potential for radicalisation. They focus on the disruptive nature of internal displacement that forces host communities to forge new relations and build trust, in spite of historical ethnic, political and social differences. Sidumo and Bertelsen argue that competition for scarce resources and diminished opportunities can lead to small scale conflict and in the long run may create space for an escalation of violence and radicalisation.

The article by Carmeliza Rosario examines the tensions surrounding state-sponsored education among Muslims of Cabo Delgado, which, as the author argues, the insurgents were able to tap in in order to coopt people from partaking in government schools. Rosario maintains that there is a long history of suspicion of state education by Muslims, but despite misgivings about the gender roles in Muslim societies, women have played an important part in providing religious education and actively participating in the related educational processes. This should be understood 'within a logic operating on shared and familiar values', asserts Rosario, instead of focusing only on insurgents taking advantage of the long-standing mistrust of the state-run schools.

The final section turns again to the past to find guidance to interpret the present. The transcript of an interview of Yussuf Adam by Carmeliza Rosário is presented as a digital addendum to the special issue. In this conversation, Adam and Rosário revisit Adam's PhD thesis, which explored the relationship between destabilisation,

foreign aid and development in Mozambique. In a characteristically quirky, elliptical and episodic manner, Adam spans decades of the history of Cabo Delgado, a place on which he has carried out research for four decades, drawing surprising connections between past and present violence.

The photo-essay by Sérgio Santimano and Paolo Israel revisits a selection of Santimano's photographs on Cabo Delgado. Taken in 1996, just after the 1992 peace accords, the photographer attempted to capture what peace looked like, by highlighting elements that purposefully depicted the region through this lens, rather than the spectres of the war that had just ended. Thus, Santimano and Israel attempt to show Cabo Delgado beyond a legacy and experience of violence, in its rich human and cultural tapestry.

While remaining acutely aware of the tendency of 'new wars' to turn into chronic conflict – especially in a context of the erosion of democracy and unbridled capitalistic plunder – we want to conclude with the flicker of hope of 'another Cabo Delgado', in peace and reconstruction, which these images offer.