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Insurgency, Economy and Politics in Cabo Delgado

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Photo by By VOA - Moçambique: População regressa a Palma depois de ataque de insurgentes, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=104272735

1. Introduction

This paper analyses the situation of the Cabo Delgado province in northern Mozambique in 2025-2026, including the trajectory of the armed conflict, military operations, humanitarian aid, economic development and political change.

Until 2010, Cabo Delgado province was one of the most neglected and poorest regions of Mozambique, despite having an exciting history (it is part of the Swahili and Indian Ocean networks in *a longue durée*), picturesque landscapes, exquisite coastline, rare timbers and hardwood, and plentiful of land and marine wildlife. In the early 2000s, rubies, graphite, coal, phosphate, sapphires and hardwood began to be exploited by multinational companies. To top that, in 2010, large deposits of natural gas were found offshore and in the Rovuma River basin, regions historically and culturally belonging to the Mwani and Swahili ethnic groups. The U.S. companies Anadarko, Occidental and Exxon Mobil, the French Total Energies, Italian Eni and other transnational corporations together with the Mozambican state became the main holders of the emerging gas industry. All this made local population hopeful for an impending economic bonanza, jobs and social mobility.

However, their hopes were dashed very quickly, as the extractive industry propelled an unprecedented land-grab rush, particular by the party and government elites, while the jobs went to those who came from other regions because local youths did not have required education, professional skills or technical training.[1] Various attempts to recover their land or receive compensation were met with violence and suppression by the security apparatus.[2] The opposition party, Renamo, popular among non-Makonde people of Cabo Delgado, went on decline during the same period.

Besides the fact that Mwani, a historically Muslim ethnic group at the coast, had suffered the most from the loss of land and livelihoods, their pre-existing grievances with a strong historical component included political, inter-ethnic and religious violent conflicts, struggle for land and resources, in particular with the mostly Christian Makonde, who are perceived to be attached to the Frelimo ruling party and have benefitted immensely from this alliance to the detriment of the Mwanis and others.[3]

The radicalisation of the Muslim youths was a response to this context, which by 2014 reached organisational and ideological heights.[4] In 2016, these youths began antagonising the old religious establishment, the State and even their own families, which led to their arrests in Macimboa da Praia and Macomia prisons. Their attempts to forcefully release their comrades in 2017 had unleashed state security persecutions against the local youths, Islamic religious establishment, and various rural communities, many of whom were innocent. In late December 2017, the government forces carried out a helicopter raid and a bombardment from naval vessels on the village of Mitumbate, where allegedly Islamic insurgents were hiding, reportedly killing 50 people, including women and children, and detaining some 200 others.

The State security and defence forces destroyed several mosques and imprisoned, tortured and even killed a few shaykhs and imams, many of whom had nothing to do with the rebellious youths. Undoubtedly, these actions alienated many people and contributed to the hardening and radicalisation, and perhaps even drew them closer to the IS (Islamic State), which the insurgents joined in 2019. They became known as the Islamic State of Mozambique (ISM), although locally they are hailed as *ash-Shabab* (The Youths). For the last nine years, Cabo Delgado has been engulfed in an armed conflict, against which the Mozambican State deployed its armed forces (FADM - Armed Defence Forces of Mozambique), private mercenary armies such as Russian Wagner and South African Van Dick, SAMIM (Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique, with troops from Botswana, Lesotho, South Africa, and Tanzania) and The Rwanda Defence Force (RDF). However, the military approach has not been able to quell the insurgency. On the contrary, the conflict expanded further in the last years within Cabo Delgado and spilled over into the neighbouring provinces of Nampula and Niassa.

2. ISM Attacks in 2025-2026

In recent months, the armed conflict in Cabo Delgado has intensified. A report by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) outlines that security incidents increased by 47 per cent in April 2026 compared to the previous month, rising from 47 to 69 incidents.[5] The incidents led to deaths, kidnappings, looting, and the destruction of property in several districts of the province, and involved 55 cases of violence against civilians, eleven armed clashes, and 25 abductions in April 2026 alone.

The situation has been deteriorating since late 2025, with insurgents expanding further into the inlands and southern parts of Cabo Delgado, and into neighbouring Nampula and Niassa provinces. Various attempts to dislodge insurgents from their main base in Katupa forest in coastal Macomia district and Quiteraje and by FADM and RDF did not bear desired results. On 27 November 2025, RDF undertook airstrikes in Mocímboa da Praia, targeting the insurgent base on Nhonge island nearby, followed by clashes on the island between the FADM navy and ISM forces. Further south on the Macomia coast, RDF and ISM forces clashed in the Simbolongo area in the week of 1 December 2025, where 35 people were killed, including women and children.[6]

The expansion of the insurgency into Nampula province since June-August 2025 has been devastating, as over 60,000 civilians fled their homes since 10 November following a series of attacks there. By the end of November, the insurgents undertook 13 attacks on civilian communities across Eráti and Memba districts and killed at least 21 civilians. There is evidence that the group has significant ties to Nampula built upon the existing long-term historical ties between

the coastal communities in the two provinces. The insurgents have also been moving around villages of the continental mainland, particularly in southern Muidumbe district and the northern end of Montepuez district of Cabo Delgado.

In 2026, the ISM insurgency expanded into Chiure, Balama, Nangade, and Montepuez districts of Cabo Delgado.[7] Between 15 January 2025 and 11 January 2026, ISM carried out approximately 300 attacks, surpassing the 260 attacks recorded in all of 2024. The insurgents also attacked various villages in the district of Ancuabe, where German GK Ancuabe Graphite mine operates. These regions experienced brutal violence, including beheadings, abductions, and the burning of civilian infrastructures, suggesting a strategic differentiation in the group's treatment of communities based on geography and operational need.[8] The situation in 2026 has worsened considerably due to a wider global and regional crisis shaped by political instability, shifting military dynamics, humanitarian decline, and deep structural grievances.[9] The conflict became more dispersed, entrenched, and complex than at any moment since its beginning in 2017.

Some of the most notorious attacks of 2026 so far are the following:

- On 31 March, a group of up to 30 militants, who came in boats along the Messalo River, attacked a group of fishermen at Nguri lake in Muidumbe district. The fishermen have been unable to return to the coast because their boats were swept away.[10]
- According to a report released by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which covers the period from 17 to 25 April 2026, nearly 800 people, about half of whom are children, were forced to flee their homes in the district of Nangade, with affected populations seeking refuge in the town of Mualela, within the same district.[11]
- More than 150 terrorists made up of children invaded the village of Muaja in the district of Ancuabe where they have not only recruited people but also set up a barrier at the entrance to Nacole, the road to the district of Montepuez.[12]
- ISM clashed with Mozambican and Rwandan forces in Nangade and Mocímboa da Praia districts.[13]
- On 30 April, the village of Nacole and the town of Minheuene in the district of Ancuabe, were attacked, when the armed group destroyed the Catholic Church, infrastructure, homes and commercial stalls, in addition to kidnapping around 22 people in the village of Muaja.[14]
- In May, the number of attacks rose even more. One of the main reasons seems to be the harvest season, whereby the insurgents attacked villages to loot food. According to witnesses, at least 27 bodies were found in the region of Namacuili and Campine, after attacks attributed to insurgents in the administrative post of Meza, district of Ancuabe. Around 25 were decapitated.[15] The insurgents destroyed the historic parish of São Luís de Monfort, parish houses, a hospital and a school, and kidnapped civilians.[16]
- At least 26 members of the Naparama group (local Makua-based traditional militia) were killed in the Messanja village, in the Katapua Administrative Post, Chiúre district, south of Cabo Delgado province, increasing the climate of fear and insecurity in that region.[17] The IS propaganda agency, *Amaq Agency News,* claimed that in addition to the deaths, several members of the group were injured during the fighting.

- On 31 May, the insurgents attacked farming areas along the Messalo River, specifically in the Nova Família camp, about 60 kilometres from the district headquarters of Muidumbe.[18] According to residents' accounts, the attackers took maize and beans stored in community granaries, besides destroying about two hectares of tobacco plantations.
- On 4 June 2026, the insurgents attacked Ancuabe district once more.[19]

Beyond attacks of the settlements and military clashes with FADM and RDF, the insurgents persist in ambushing civilian vehicles on the main roads and boats at the sea for ransom. For example, on 8 April 2026, a group of insurgents stopped a trader on a motorbike and stole her goods and 7,000 meticais in cash near Nachiji village south of Mocímboa da Praia town. On 14 April 2026, ISM held a boat going to Tanzania near Quilanhune Island until a ransom was paid, and they seized its cargo. On 9 May, insurgents landed on Tambuzi Island, approximately 25 kilometres offshore of Mocímboa da Praia town, where they extorted money from boat operators.[20] On 12 May, they returned to seize petrol. On 10 May, the insurgents seized a fishing boat at Pangane.

The other strategy adopted by the ISM insurgents is their forays into the mining sector, where they loot, extort, and recruit, especially among the artisanal miners.[21] Some 4,000 to 10,000 people are involved in artisanal mining in Cabo Delgado, including illegal miners, small-scale food traders, vendors of equipment used in mining (picks, shovels and lanterns), prostitutes, vendors of construction materials (poles, bamboo and rope), illegal gold and gemstone buyers and motorcycle taxi drivers.[22] Across the country there are 250,000 active artisanal miners, and when the entire value chain is considered, including suppliers, traders, and associated services, artisanal mining is estimated to support up to 800,000 jobs nationwide.[23]

Gold seems to be of particular interest to ISM, indicating that they found a stable market for the looted gold. On 30 and 31 March2026, a large group of over 100 insurgents arrived at gold mine sites at Minhanha and Ravia in south of Macomia district.[24] They captured up to 80 miners, holding them for ransom of 50,000 meticais each.[25] On 17 May , the insurgents went to Cororine mine in Namuno district, one of the province's largest artisanal gold mining sites.[26]

Jerry Maquenzi and João Feijó Jerry argue that the ruby mining and timber exploration sectors have been relatively safe from the insurgents, fuelling speculation that these large companies are paying protection fees so that they do not become targets for insurgent attacks.[27] For example, while raiding the artisanal mining sites, the insurgents bypassed the Montepuez Ruby Mining and Gemrock Mozambique nearby on 30 April 2026.[28] This contrast with other mining companies, in particular of graphite. In 2022, the AMG Graphit Kropfmuhl (GK) and Twigg Mining and Exploration, a subsidiary in Mozambique of the Australian company Syrah, suspended their graphite mining operations in Ancuabe, claiming *force majeure* after the attacks by the insurgents and beheading of two workers.[29]

The insurgents continue killing villagers working on their land plots during their incursions into the villages, where they loot food and burn houses. For example, between 10 and 14 April 2026, a group of ISM fighters attacked four villages west of Macomia town, killing at least six civilians and abducting two. The group then moved south, hitting Nguida and Chicomo, directly west of Macomia town, before attacking Iba village in neighbouring Meluco district.

According to one source, the group was made up of 100 well-armed men.[30]

However, the insurgents have also been deploying "the winning of hearts-and-minds" approach, especially in Muslims coastal communities like Quissanga, Macomia and Meluco, with whom they maintain less violent relations and embed proselytization campaigns. According to João Feijó, all along the coast of Cabo Delgado, there are reports of insurgents purchasing products from the population or praying in mosques with the locals, which shows a complicity between the rebels and the locals, with whom the insurgents also watched humorous videos (from Tanzania) and played football matches.[31] The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) reported that on 10 May 2026, there was a rumoured sighting of insurgency leader Ali Mabondo watching a La Liga football match between Barcelona and Real Madrid in the Nanduadua neighbourhood of Mocímboa da Praia town, where he is from.[32] There are also reports of insurgents allegedly staying the night with family members. Except for isolated cases of individuals selling alcohol, relations between the population in the coastal areas and the insurgents have reportedly become cordial in recent years.

This attitude contrasts with that of government soldiers, who are more impersonal and sometimes steal coal and food, and who are periodically accused of human rights violations, like killings of civilians, arbitrary detentions, rape and forced disappearances.[33] One such case occurred on 15 March 2026, when a navy patrol of the FADM fired on six fishing boats off the coast of Mocímboa da Praia, killing at least 13 people.[34] Communities across coastal areas of Macomia, Quissanga, Muidumbe, and Mocímboa da Praia report beatings, arbitrary detentions, and retaliation for suspected collaboration with insurgents. Incidents at sea, like the killings on Rolas Island and along the Pangane–Mussemuko route in 2025, have further damaged the legitimacy of state forces. Furthermore, FADM and police often extort victims. For instance, on 9 May insurgents landed on Tambuzi Island, forcing 13 boat operators to flee the island. They were later arrested at sea by a FADM navy patrol vessel and taken to Mocímboa da Praia, where they were detained. According to one source, they were not released until they had paid 2,000 meticais each (roughly 31 U.S.-dollars at the time).[35] On 10 May 2026, a FADM navy patrol seized two boats escaping from the insurgents and impounded them on Ibo Island. Around 12 May, the FADM navy stopped the boat of a Quissanga businessman on Quilanhune Island, only releasing it after the operator had paid.[36]

In some places, the insurgents set up roadblocks and demand toll money from the passing vehicles. However, the FADM and other State security forces act the same way, collecting tolls and arbitrarily arresting and beating people with no money. The fact that these cases are rarely brought to justice further alienates the local populations from the armed forces.[37]

3. Deepening Humanitarian Crisis

The Cabo Delgado conflict has already claimed more than 6,600 lives and sparked one of the largest humanitarian crises in Southern Africa, affecting hundreds of thousands of people and placing additional pressure on the province's economic and social recovery efforts. As pointed out by the TAG,[38] global aid cuts, driven largely by reductions in the U.S. foreign-assistance budget and broader shifts among European donors, left the Mozambique humanitarian response funded at less than 30 per cent of requirements and communities more vulnerable to exploitation by insurgents who selectively provide food or basic services in vacuums left by the State. Protection services, including those addressing Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Child Protection, were sharply curtailed. Existing inequalities have deepened, livelihoods collapsed in agricultural areas, while insecurity offshore and military restrictions undermined fisheries of coastal economies. The N380 and N14 corridors, vital for trade between Pemba, Mueda, Mocímboa da Praia, and Nampula, became unstable, causing price spikes, shortages, and transport disruptions. Local markets in Macomia, Montepuez, and Pemba suffered as traders abandoned routes due to ambush risks.

Almost half a million people were newly displaced in 2025, many experiencing their second or third displacement. Recent attacks in Ancuabe, Montepuez, Balama, Chiure, and Erati, left the population with shortages of food, water, and health services. United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) flights were suspended in key districts, escorts became mandatory along the main routes in the province, and aid convoys faced ambushes or extortion at insurgent-run checkpoints. Bureaucratic hurdles, including delays in Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) work permits, further reduced humanitarian presence in high-needs areas.

In 2026, according to IOM[39] and the European Union[40], between 11,000 to 15,286 people, equivalent to 4,886 families, fled from Ancuabe and Montepuez districts following recent attacks, including 4,301 adult women (28 per cent), 102 of whom were pregnant, 7,781 children (51 per cent of those displaced from Ancuabe), ten of whom arrived at the shelters without family, 292 people over 60 years old and 33 people with disabilities. IOM indicates that at the same period, 767 individuals, comprising 173 families, left their communities in Nangade district.[41] Children represent the most affected group, totalling 346 displaced persons, followed by 251 women, which shows a high level of vulnerability among the affected population. There are significant risks of family separation, gender-based violence, loss of documents and psychosocial suffering. The most urgent needs for the displaced people are access to food, emergency shelter, medicine and essential non-food items.

The United Kingdom Embassy in Mozambique announced that it has invested 20 million euros since 2022 to expand water access programs and provide shelter for victims of terrorism in Cabo Delgado, in the northern region of the country, benefiting 150,000 people per year.[42] OCHA has allocated around 98 million U.S.-dollars in emergency

funding this year to Mozambique to support people affected by armed conflicts and natural disasters. The UN Humanitarian Coordinator Catherine Sozi pointed out that the country is facing multiple interconnected challenges, including ongoing violence in the north linked to attacks by armed groups, alongside severe flooding in recent months that has destroyed infrastructure and disrupted essential services for affected populations.[43]

The EU has intervened at different levels to help Mozambique respond to the instability in northern Mozambique, working through an 'integrated approach' combining humanitarian, development, peacebuilding and security assistance (including the provision of military training and non-lethal equipment), as well as political and diplomatic engagement, among other things. The EU plans humanitarian aid of 41.5 million euros, since it aims at mitigating the consequences of the floods that affected the country.[44] These funds are not intended solely for Cabo Delgado but for the whole country, and they are considerably lower than what is required to support 1.3 million affected people adequately.[45] Besides the general shortage of funds, CIP (Centre for Public Integrity, a Mozambican NGO) has highlighted in several reports that the prevailing corruption at the local centres of the distribution of the humanitarian aid has significantly hampered the assistance to those in need.

On 24 October 2025, the Federal Government of Germany and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Mozambique renewed their partnership to promote peace, stability, and resilience in the north of the country and signed a new agreement worth two million euros to strengthen efforts to consolidate peace and social cohesion in conflict-affected areas, particularly in Cabo Delgado province.[46] The Programme for the Stabilization of Northern Mozambique focuses on three key areas: 1) Security and rule of law, to strengthen community safety and protect populations; 2) Infrastructure rehabilitation, to enable access to essential services; and 3) Socio-economic recovery, to expand livelihood opportunities and resilience among affected populations. Since its inception, the programme has supported the rehabilitation of public facilities, including schools, markets, health centres, and administrative offices; facilitated community dialogues to promote reconciliation and trust-building; and provided livelihood support to thousands of households rebuilding their lives in resettled areas. The programme complements UNDP's decentralization planning, as well as its programme on Rule of Law and Access to Justice, social cohesion, and peace building work with community-based approaches.

4. The Armed Forces

The FADM remain under-equipped, under-resourced, and heavily dependent on external partners. Their operations are largely defensive and reactive, hampered by lack of mobility, poor logistics, and limited intelligence capabilities.

The RDF were deployed in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province in July 2021, following an ISM attack on Palma town near Afungi LNG project, one month before SAMIM was deployed. Peter Bofin maintains that Rwanda has made a significant contribution to controlling Islamist insurgency and built a reputation for effective counterinsurgency by centring civilian protection in their operations.[47] While SAMIM withdrew from Cabo Delgado after four years of operations, the Rwandan military intervention has doubled to over 4,000 troops, now exceeding 6,300. Rwandan troops gained a considerable success in 2022, establishing a high-profile presence in Mocímboa da Praia, Palma Macomia and Ancuabe districts. However, the Rwandan military lacks maritime capability, essential for combatting an insurgency that involves fishing communities spread over the coast and the outlying islands.

The Rwandan Defence Force were funded by the European Union, that spent 40 million euros in 36 months. This agreement ended on May 2026 due to the conclusion of contract and because of the involvement of Kigali in the ongoing armed conflict in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The United States, which is funding the LNG megaproject led by France's TotalEnergies in Cabo Delgado, has imposed sanctions on the RDF.[48]

The EU has expressed interest in capacitating Mozambican troops instead of supporting the Rwandan ones.[49] The EU funds and trains some 1,600 Mozambican soldiers, with the aim of protecting the civilian population, helping to restore security in the Cabo Delgado region and eventually having the national army take over from foreign troops in northern Mozambique. To complement this effort, the EU has earmarked 89 million euros in non-lethal equipment and supplies for the units training its mission. The European Council extended on 14 May 2024 the mandate of the EU Training Mission in Mozambique, the EU Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM), until 30 June 2026, with a budget envelope of more than 14 million euros for this period. In addition, it has decided to adapt the mission's strategic objectives to the new circumstances, thus favouring its transition from a training model to an assistance model, combining advice, mentoring and specialized training in support of the Mozambican armed forces. Because of this change, as of 1 September 2024, the mission was renamed the EU Military Assistance Mission Mozambique (EUMAM Mozambique).[50]

In 2026, from 1 June to 19 June , the French Armed Forces of the South Indian Ocean Zone (FAZSOI) in collaboration with the EUMAM Mozambique, have been carrying out training for the Armed Defence Forces of Mozambique in Maputo.[51] The activities include courses on maintenance of military vehicles and combating improvised explosive devices (IED), aiming at reinforcing the operational capabilities of Mozambican

troops deployed to combat terrorism in Cabo Delgado.

But the operational results of FADM remain slow, and Mozambique's forces are still far from being able to replace Rwanda in the areas where it matters most. This was one of the reasons why the Mozambican government voiced "concern" and "shock" at the announcement at the EU ending its support to Rwandan forces, assuring that it is seeking alternatives and that U.S. sanctions do not affect Rwanda's operation in Cabo Delgado.[52] On 19 May , Rwandan Foreign Minister Olivier Nduhungirehe said Rwanda has decided to negotiate exclusively with the Government of Mozambique, which in turn has assured that it will continue to provide the necessary funding for Rwandan security forces' activities.[53] This is despite that in the previous year, the Mozambican government was unable to honour its commitment to the Rwandan troops and accumulated a debt exceeding 22 million U.S.-dollars. The Mozambican journalist Estacio Valoi argues that "Mozambique already contributes to the Rwandan deployment, reportedly including around $2m per month for logistics. But it would struggle, to say the least, to cover the full cost of the operation alone. If Maputo has now "secured" the necessary funding, the obvious questions are how much, from whom, for how long, and under what conditions."[54]

By the end of May 2026, it was clear that Macron, TotalEnergies and Exxon Mobil have secured a special exemption from sanctions for the RDF from the USA and President Trump to keep working in Mozambique.[55] According to reports published by *Africa Intelligence*, the exemption enables the two oil companies to maintain security coordination with Rwandan troops protecting major gas infrastructure projects in northern Mozambique.[56]

5. The Economic Outlook

Mozambique State revenues from Large-Scale Projects (LSPs) in the mining, hydrocarbons and metallurgical sectors fell by 41 per cent in 2025, totalling 157 million U.S.-dollars, according to official data from the General State Accounts (CGE).[57] Data from CGE indicates that, together, LSPs had a loss of around 12 billion meticais in 2025 against the recorded loss of 35,468.39 million Meticais in 2024".[58] Production in Mozambique of graphite fell by 40 per cent in the first half of 2024, when Mozambique produced 34,899 tons of graphite in this period, 11 per cent of the target set for this year, which is 329,040 tons, which compares with 58,708 tons in the first six months of 2023. All these shortfalls were due to the *force majeure* that ExxonMobil and TotalEnergies imposed after ISM attacked Palma town in 2021 and GK Ancuabe Graphite Mine and Twigg Mining and Exploration (Syrah), imposed in 2022 following attacks in their mining sites.[59]

Other reasons were related to human rights abuses by the security forces of the gas and mining companies, as well as by the Mozambican state security apparatus

and military. This led the UK to announce on 1 December 2025 the withdrawal of its financial support for Mozambique LNG, the TotalEnergies-led project at Afungi, citing the overall increase of risks. In a similar manner, the Dutch government announced its withdrawal of Mozambique LNG due to allegations of human rights violations, especially the reported killing of civilians by a Mozambican Joint Task Force (JTF) funded by TotalEnergies at the *Quatro Caminhos* entrance to the LNG site in 2021. This episode served as the basis for the criminal complaint by the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), filed in France on 17 November 2025 accusing TotalEnergies of complicity in war crimes, torture, and enforced disappearances in Mozambique.

However, the economic outlook for the next years appears to be better because the investment into gas exploration on the coast of Cabo Delgado have had major changes in the last months of 2025: ExxonMobil has lifted *force majeure* on its Rovuma LNG project. The main player, TotalEnergies, also lifted *force majeure* but demanded compensation of 4.5 billion U.S. dollars as well as a ten-years extension of its project, citing financial losses during the four years of interrupted activities. The Mozambican government opted to restore only the actual period of suspension and commissioned an independent audit to verify all related expenses. The first LNG production for both the Exxon-led Rovuma and TotalEnergies' projects is expected in the early 2030s.

Mozambique's GDP is expected to grow by 2.1 per cent in 2026 and 3.5 per cent in 2027, "supported by a recovery in the extractive sector" and "increased investment", according to the African Economic Perspectives report.[60] A macroeconomic study by Standard Bank Mozambique predicts that the Rovuma LNG project could trigger a structural transformation of the Mozambican economy, with the potential to increase the country's GDP by around eleven billion U.S.-dollars per year. The study also projects the creation of around 151,000 jobs, including direct, indirect, and induced employment across the project's value chain.[61] ExxonMobil and ENH (Empresa Nacional de Hidrocarbonetos, Mozambique State company) announced an investment of 40 million U.S.-dollars to create a technical-professional training centre aimed at training Mozambicans for the oil and gas sector and emphasized the need to invest in education, vocational training, and skill development to enable access to technical and management roles, thereby reducing dependence on foreign labour.[62]

Both China and the United States have already established positions in Mozambique's graphite sector.[63] On the U.S. side, Australian miner Syrah Resources operates the Balama graphite mine with support from Washington. The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) provided a loan worth 150 million U.S.-dollars to Syrah's local subsidiary in November 2024. Earlier, in 2022, the U.S. Department of Energy extended a 102 million U.S.-dollars loan to support Syrah's Vidalia anode facility in Louisiana, which processes graphite supplied from Balama. In February 2026, the U.S. Trade and Development Agency (USTDA) awarded a grant to fund work related to the pre-feasibility study of the Monte Muambe rare earth project. British company Altona Rare Earths is developing the project, which could produce 15,000 tons of mixed rare earth carbonate annually.

China, on the other hand, inaugurated a graphite processing plant with an annual capacity of 200,000 tons in January 2026.[64] The Chinese company DH Mining owns the

facility and invested 200 million U.S.-dollars in the Nipepe project, Niassa province. Another Chinese group, Shandong Yulong Gold, is moving to acquire a 70 per cent stake in Australian company Triton Minerals' Ancuabe graphite project through its subsidiary NQM Gold 2.

On 3 June 2026, Mozambican President Daniel Chapo signed into law a legislation requiring a free 15 per cent state participation in all mining projects and prohibiting exports of unprocessed minerals.[65] The law should strengthen the economic position of the Mozambican companies and the State. Through these measures, Mozambique aims at encouraging companies to process minerals domestically rather than export them in raw form. The move comes as Beijing and Washington seek to strengthen access to Mozambique's critical minerals, giving Maputo additional leverage in negotiations with foreign investors.

6. Political Context

Politically, the country remains fragile. Thousands of detainees from the 2024–25 post-electoral protests remained imprisoned without trial at the end of 2025. This instability continues to draw state resources away from Cabo Delgado, inadvertently strengthening ISM's operational freedom.

However, the Mozambican government took several steps to strengthen its political position on the international arena. It signed an agreement with Tanzania in May 2026 to define the land border in a project valued at around 400,000 U.S.-dollars.[66] This project should improve border control between the two countries and contribute to the supervision of the cross-border activities, including in counterterrorism.

In May 2026, the governments of Mozambique and Russia have agreed to strengthen economic, legal, and contractual cooperation, as well as to deepen collaboration in humanitarian areas and in the fight against terrorism, international extremism, and other forms of transnational crime.[67]

President Chapo visited China between 16 and 22 April and met President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Li Qiang.[68] The bilateral trade between Mozambique and China reached 5.19 billion U.S.-dollars in 2024, as China seeks to expand its investments in energy, infrastructure and mineral resources, such as graphite and titanium. China's interest in Mozambique's offshore gas might be confronted by the ongoing operations of U.S.'s Exxon Mobil in Rovuma and Japan's Mitsui Corporation, a key partner of TotalEnergies' operations on Cabo Delgado's Afungi Peninsula.

China and Mozambique have also agreed to map major untapped deposits of critical minerals, such as graphite, lithium, and rare-earth elements in the north of the country, including in Cabo Delgado. And, under a new memorandum of understanding, China will support Mozambique's counter-terrorism

efforts through expanded military and law enforcement collaboration. The agreement includes training for personnel, as well as the provision of equipment, technology, and joint exercises.[69] Soon, the Rwandan Defence Force, funded by Exxon Mobil and TotalEnergies, might have to act alongside Chinese and maybe even Russian contingents in Cabo Delgado.

7. Conclusion

The lifting of the *force majeur* by transnational gas and graphite companies and the increase of foreign direct investment might uplift the lives of ordinary Mozambicans, especially the long-suffering people of Cabo Delgado. The fact that foreign companies now seek to enhance the inclusion of the local population in their hiring and professional training processes indicates shifting policies, resulting from the understanding that ISM insurgents use the socio-economic demands of the local population to inflame popular revolt and armed insurgency. Hence, the Mozambican Government requested assistance from China in tackling poverty. If successful, such policies should impact positively Cabo Delgado, which remains one of the poorest regions of the country and whose poverty contributed to the emergence of the armed insurgency.

Humanitarian aid is also being provided to the displaced population, albeit below what is needed and despite U.S. funding cuts to UN agencies and the elimination of the USAID by the current Trump administration. The stress is on resilience, peacebuilding, reconstruction, human rights and justice, and on providing necessities such as food, shelter, medicine, protection and security. But the corruption of the local aid distributers, especially in refugee camps and similar contexts, needs to be tackled with utmost firmness.

The economic and social outlook of Mozambique seem to be generally positive, despite the current shortfalls related not only to local issues such as conflict in Cabo Delgado, vulnerable climate conditions of the country, the shortage of currency, and prevailing corruption, but also due to the international context of the Iran war, U.S. tariffs, and the dearth of fuel and fertilizers. However, the Mozambican Government is attempting to overcome these obstacles by tackling corruption and deepening diplomatic ties with Russia and China, that could ease access to fuel and fertilizers and assist in building infrastructures. Russia and China are also committed to address the Cabo Delgado conflict, but these two countries are not known to be overly supportive of Muslim populations in their own countries or upholding human rights unreservedly.

In terms of military operations against the ISM, the EU will continue to train and support the FADM, which should gradually assume a more central role in the fight against ISM. The RDF will be subsidized by Exxon Mobil and Total Energies to continue operating in Cabo Delgado after gaining a special exemption

from the Trump administration on sanctions, although its priority will probably concern the protection of these two oil and gas companies and their interests, rather than that of local population. However, defeating ISM militarily is a difficult task, as military interventions against jihadists in other parts of Africa, such as in Chad, Mali, Nigeria, Kenya, and Somalia, though led to the retreat of jihadists, but never completely defeated them. The insistence on military approach alone runs the risk of turning the conflicts into 'forever wars'.[70] Stig Jarle Hansen[71] suggests that the lack of security of the rural population is an essential element in understanding the failure of international military interventions. We can only hope that the security of the rural population would become the key aim of the military operations in Cabo Delgado.

It is even harder to defeat ISM ideologically and to uproot its populational support bases completely. This is because the Islamist ideology remains attractive to some circles of global resistance, who transform and reinterpret it according to local contexts. Thus, even if the IS disappears, the jihadist ideology would continue to live on and be carried forward by other radicals. Recently, the Cabo Delgado jihadism has started attracting attention not only of global IS and African jihadists, such as al-Hijra of Kenya, al-Shabaab of Somalia and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) of Uganda and DRC, but also of youngsters in Western Europe. The French newspaper Le Monde reported in May 2026 that six young French nationals were convicted in Paris for planning to migrate to Mozambique together and join ISM in Cabo Delgado province.[72] Thus, every effort must be undertaken for Cabo Delgado not to turn into a global jihadi hub.

Dislodging sympathies to Islamists is difficult because the bulk of the jihadists originate from local communities and families, who appropriated local grievances still unresolved, and pose as heroes fighting against injustice, corruption, and oppression. To overcome these issues requires detailed, slow, patient, and longstanding collaboration with the affected communities. A support should be provided not only to victims, but also to young people who have engaged in jihad, offering ways for them to abandon violence, creating de-radicalization programs, pathways to amnesty, psychological support, and re-education for a peaceful life.

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