ISLAMIC STATE CENTRAL AFRICA PROVINCE (ISCAP): A THREAT TO REGIONAL STABILITY AND SECURITY

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Abstract

The emergence of the Islamic State's new affiliate—Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP)—in Sub-Saharan Africa, has a devastating effect on the security and political landscape of an already fragile and unstable region. Based mainly on open sources, including think tanks, journals, U.N. reports, and news media, this paper attempts to understand the motivations and operations of the Islamic State fighters of this province and the dangers ISCAP presents to local and international actors.

Introduction

Despite losing most of its territory in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), appears to be gaining ground across Africa (Paquette, 2020), which could have considerable consequences in some areas already experiencing extreme poverty, "endemic corruption" and state weakness (Garcia, 2019, p. 246). Since 2014, the militant Salafi-jihadist group appears to be expanding its influence on the continent through a network of affiliates in the West, North, and East African regions (Reva, n.d). ISIS control of African territory is less than 1% and, therefore, the jihadist group may not be on the verge of ruling the continent (Zenn, 2020). Nonetheless, ISIS expansion, recruitment, especially of young people, and attacks remain a major concern in the region (Zenn, 2020). North Africa, for example, is an important region for the Islamic state since almost 10,000 fighters from Maghreb and Egypt are thought to have joined ISIS (Reva, n.d). The jihadist organization "has not managed to establish itself as firmly in other [African] regions" (Reva, n.d, para. 9). However, in 2019, the Islamic State in Central Africa Province (ISCAP) was officially recognized as a new affiliate (Jonyo & Okul, 2020, p.13). ISCAP is emerging as "a strong affiliate of ISIL employing sophisticated tactics and capabilities, emboldened by recent operational successes" (United Nations Security Council, 2021, p. 3). Therefore, ISCAP poses an immediate threat to state authorities, armed forces, multinational companies, and the local populations.

The Islamic fighters of the Central Africa Province

The Islamic State in Central Africa Province "represents two independent and geographically distinct insurgencies" (Warner et al. 2020, p. 24). ISCAP is comprised of a Ugandan rebel movement, known as the Allied Democratic

Forces (ADF) based in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and a group of insurgents in Cabo Delgado Province (Mozambique), also known as Ansar al-Sunna**,** al-Shabaab (distinct from the terrorist Somali group), or Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama'ah (ASWJ) (Barnett, 2020). However, it remains unclear whether the ADF and Ansar al-Sunna operate as a whole under ISCAP or whether ISCAP is made up of small factions of both groups (Hamming, 2021; Jonyo & Okul, 2020). The two African insurgent groups have one thing in common: they notably appeared respectively in 1995 and 2014 (Warner et al., 2020) in opposition to regimes that came to power as left-wing, pan-African liberation movements (Barnett, 2020). Therefore, beyond their radical religious beliefs, these groups should also be understood as opponents to post-colonial nation-building, in which they might have felt excluded.

The presence of fighters (in ISCAP) from other East African countries raises concerns about the potential regionalization of this conflict (Moss, 2020). In fact, ISCAP's branches in Mozambique and Congo appear also to include foreign fighters from other East African countries and at least some from the Middle East, in the case of the Congo chapter (The Soufan Centre, 2020). In 2021, the United States labelled the respective leaders of the ADF, Ansar al-Sunna, Seka Musa Baluku, and Abu Yasir, as "specially designated global terrorists" (Nichols, 2021, para. 2). The United Nations has also designated both armed groups (Ansar al-Sunna and ADF) as foreign terrorist organizations and now refers to both, Ansar al-Sunna and ADF, as ISIS Mozambique and ISIS DRC (International Crisis Group, 2021; Nichols, 2021).

Motivations

Despite its Islamic roots, the creation of the Islamic State in Uganda does not appear to have been a motivational force behind the AFD's agenda. Islam appears, instead, as a tool to achieve larger political goals (Postings, 2018). An ex-combatant interviewed in 2002 expressed the belief that "the ADF's agenda was purely political [and] the leaders disguised their political motives as religion" (Postings, 2018, para. 14). Although "historically the DRC and the international community have generally not referred to these armed groups as terrorists", the ADF reportedly established links with ISIS at the end of 2018 (Bureau of Counter Terrorism, 2019, para. 2).

Extremist ideology has become central in the militants' speeches, and the use of a flag similar to ISIS in propaganda videos seems to indicate the group's alignment with ISIS. For example, The Congo Research Group's analysis of 35 videos posted to *Telegram*, *Facebook,* and *YouTube* between 2016 and 2017 by one ADF member shows a "shift in the rhetoric employed by the

movement, from a war against the Ugandan government to a broader struggle for Islam" (Postings 2018, para. 16).

These videos display not only ADF attacks on "non-believers," "*kafiris*," and "Congolese troops (...) trying to fight Islam" (Postings, 2020, para. 17), but they also invite other people to join the war against the government. Furthermore, some ADF fighters used a similar flag displayed by terrorist groups, such as Al-Shabaab, Al-Qaeda, and Boko Haram in West Africa (Burke 2019; Kasasira 2019). As the analysis of the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change stresses, those groups subscribe to a distorted interpretation of Islam that justifies the use of violence (Bukarti & Munasinghe, 2020).

However, even today, and despite alleged ties to the Islamic State, the ADF remains a complex movement that cannot be defined solely through this prism of Islamic extremism. As Hillary Matfess (2019) points out in her analysis of local jihadism in Africa:

> Although the ADF may now use rhetoric that aligns its activities with transnational jihadi groups, it has spent years brokering relationships with local politicians and businessmen, recruiting members by speaking to local grievances, and embedding itself in the communities where it operates in eastern Congo. (para. 5)

Furthermore, "the ADF has taken on many faces ranging from Salafism-jihadist to secular, ethno-nationalist and secessionist nationalism, each aimed at different audiences and employed for different purposes" (Nantulya, 2020, para. 2). ADF's multiple identities make the understanding of this group and its motivations even more complex and raise several questions about the real connection between the Islamic State and ADF's current ideology. This connection has been much debated by several actors, including non-states and international actors. The U.N. Secretary-General, António Guterres, maintains that ADF activists are part of a jihadist network stretching from Libya to Mozambique (International Crisis Group, 2019). However, regional intelligence and security sources found little evidence of ADF's links with international jihad. They argue that the killing of civilians is shaped by local political factors (International Crisis Group, 2019). Nonetheless, ISIS publicly acknowledged ADF "as an affiliate group at the end of 2018" and has "claimed responsibility for some ADF attributed attacks" (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2020, p. 27).

As for Ansar al-Sunna in Mozambique, Eric Morier-Genoud's analysis on the origins of the jihadi insurgency in Mozambique argues that the group started as an Islamist sect in 2007 (as cited in Hamming, 2021, para. 3). Ansar al-Sunna was first a religious organization and became a militarized group a few years later (Fabre & Mélyon, n.d). Popular among the local youth, the group

focused on building schools and mosques and providing education to local populations, including women (Hamming, 2021). Despite its growing popularity among young people, local Muslim communities "sought to limit" Ansar al-Sunna's "interference" (Hamming, 2021, para. 4) with the Islamic traditions of the region.

In fact, Ansar al-Sunna's radical interpretation of Islam is based on an ideology introduced in the region by young former expatriates, after their studies in Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf (Pirio, Pittelli, & Adam, 2018). This fundamental Islamism (Wahhabism) seems to differ from the teachings of local traditional Islamic organizations and to contradict the idea of a moderate Sufi Islam practiced in the region (Fabre & Mélyon, n.d.; Makonye, 2020). The latter is considered to be "tolerant" and "peaceful" (Makonye, 2020, p. 65) and dates back to the days of Portuguese colonial rule and included elements of local traditions and practices.

However, Ansar al-Sunna's anti-Sufi rhetoric seems particularly appealing to many people in the region, especially the Mozambican youth in a precarious situation, mainly affected by poverty and disappointed by the country's government policies. In other words, many view Sufi leaders as being passive towards government policies perceived to affect Muslims negatively (Makonye, 2020).

As Bukarti and Munasinghe (2020) reiterate in the briefing on the Mozambique conflict:

> The group's hard-line narrative positioned its idea of puritanical Islamic government as a panacea for decades of political exclusion, unemployment and poverty, which are more prevalent in the Muslim-majority areas of the north. (p. 5)

Therefore, beyond the clash of religious ideologies between Ansar al-Sunna and community leaders, Ansar al- Sunna's rebellion seems to be fueled by a combination of poor socio-economic conditions, poverty, and inefficiency in government services in Cabo Delgado, one of the least developed part of the country (The UN Refugee Agency, 2020).

Similar to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the insurgency became more radical, with ASWJ pledging "allegiance to Islamic State caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi" (Hamming, 2021, para. 7).

In 2018, a photo of six fighters standing in front of the black flag used by ISIS was reportedly shared on pro-IS Telegram channels (Hamming, 2021). The Islamic State confirmed that a "contingent of mujahedin" (Hamming, 2021, para. 7) in Mozambique had joined its Central African Province. In June 2018, ISIS claimed responsibility for an attack in the country for the first time and

had continued to claim responsibility for Ansar al-Sunna attacks under its ISCAP structure (Bukarti & Munasinghe, 2020).

The links between the ADF, Ansar al-Sunna, and even their connections with the Islamic State remain unclear. However, some reports have confirmed this regional connection between the two branches of ISCAP and the transnational connections with other jihadist groups in Kenya and Tanzania, "given the porousness of borders in the region and the historical interconnectedness of East Africa's Islamic networks" (Barnett, 2020, para. 30). Fifty-nine Ansar al-Sunna fighters have reportedly received militant training in Tanzania. According to one detainee, in ADF camps in the DRC, the group has also sent members to Kenya and Somalia for military and/or religious training (Barnett, 2020).

The extent of the relationship between the Islamic State and its Congolese and Mozambican branches is still unclear, especially regarding communication, technical assistance, and training (Moss & Pigeon, 2020; Gras, 2021). However, the Islamic State has "strategically co-opted (…) [the] local narrative and [the success of the attacks perpetrated by the Central African fighters] for its own propaganda and notoriety" (Moss & Pigeon 2020, p. 3). In other words, if for the Mozambican and Congolese branches, being part of the Islamic State seems to ensure more visibility to their fights, for the Islamic State, recognizing these factions could confirm its global expansion, presence, and strength, despite the decline of the Islamic State in the Middle East.

Operations and Strategies

ISCAP's affiliates in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique have strengthened their operations by increasing recruitment, seizing cities, destroying infrastructure, and attacking towns (United Nations Security Council, 2021). These attacks have caused the displacement of around 200,000 people since 2017, and at least 2,000 people, including civilians, police, and military, have been killed as a result of their activities (Fabre & Mélyon, n.d.). However, it also appears that ISCAP has gradually changed its tactics to survive and expand its territory (Goldberg, 2020). Ansar al-Sunna attacks are arguably intended to establish its territory beyond Cabo Delgado and expand its territory geographically. Like other terror organizations in Africa, the insurgents are employing the methods of Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab as well as strategies using heavy weapons, mass kidnappings, and forced recruitment against the population (Goldberg, 2020; Fabre & Mélyon, n.d.). The group also seems to have shifted from guerrilla warfare targeting civilians to attacks on regions with a significant military and private presence (Estelle & Darden, 2021). Most importantly, the fighters have extended operations in several districts and provinces, "demonstrating a strategic

intention to capture more localities and strengthen operational capacities" (United Nations Security Council, 2021, p. 6). Despite sustained military operations by the state's security forces, the fighters were able to capture Mocimboa da Praia port (United Nations Security Council, 2021, p. 6).

On March 23 and 25, 2020, the coastal towns of Mocimboa da Praia and Quissanga were attacked from land and sea. Ansar al-Sunna occupied these locations for several hours (Fabre & Mélyon, n.d.). Moreover, the group is thought to have used drones in preparation for its latest attacks (Fabre & Mélyon, n.d.). On May 21, 2020, 150 fighters attacked the town of Macomia, which was under Ansar al-Sunna's occupation until May 31, 2020 (Fabre & Mélyon, n.d.).

In 2020, the group pursued its operations against law enforcement, resulting in the deaths of six members of defence and security forces, and the seizure of the police command center (Bukarti & Munasinghe, 2020). Most importantly, these attacks showcase the militants' alignment with ISIL, as they waved ISIS' black flag in front of the police command center. The Province of the Islamic State of Central Africa (ISCAP) claimed responsibility for the attacks carried out by Ansar al-Sunna, including the seizure of the territory of the town of Namawanda in Muidumbe (Bukarti & Munasinghe, 2020).

As for the Congolese branch of ISCAP, their attacks launched in *Beni* and other localities and provinces of North Kivu and *Ituri*, which have been described as "advanced" and "bolstered" operations on the United Nations Secretary-General's report (United Nations Security Council, 2021, p. 6). They allegedly succeeded in confiscating weapons and armaments from the Congolese armed forces (United Nations Security Council, 2021). The group launched an onslaught on the Kangbayi central prison in Beni to release its operatives, with more than 1,000 prisoners reportedly escaping, including 200 ISCAP militants (United Nations Security Council, 2021; Candland et al., 2021). It has been reported that another attack, claimed by ISIL, against the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), near the northern city of Beni, resulted in the death of one Indonesian peacekeeper (Security Council, 2020).

Finally, ISCAP activists appear also to employ techniques and strategies used by other groups, such as the Somali group, Al-Shabaab, during the food crisis in Somalia, through the distribution of food and other services to the local populations (Rono 2017; Fabre & Mélyon, n.d.). Such strategies likely aim to ensure the jihadist groups legitimacy and undermine the credibility of the state (The Financial Action Task Force, 2015). As Tori DeAngelis (2009) mentioned in her analysis of terrorism, "the terrorist of one group is the freedom fighter of another group" (Para. 1). Therefore, such tactics, mainly

used to build support among local populations, could also promote recruitment.

ISCAP'S Threat to Various Local and International Actors

Despite its affiliation with the Islamic State, Mozambique's insurgency also finds its deepest roots in local socio-economic and political grievances arising "from an emerging and exploitative regional liquified natural gas industry, and perceived and actual political marginalization by the state" (Moss, 2020, para. 2). Rich in natural resources, Cabo Delgado remains a hub for mineral and petroleum exploration (West, 2018). However, the presence of ISCAP in Mozambique significantly undermines the country's political stability and, consequently, Mozambique's economic development. A 2001 survey of companies in the mining industry found that armed conflict was the main reason cited by 78% of companies for abandoning their activities (OCDE, 2002, p. 13). This also seems to be the case in the oil sector, as exemplified by the suspension of activities carried out by the subcontractors of the oil company, Anadarko, in Mozambique, due to the insecurity observed in the region in 2018 (West, 2018). Most importantly, "the violence has raised concerns regarding investment in Cabo Delgado's Liquified and Natural Gas sector" since "multinational companies have to increase both onsite and offsite security which will all impact the operational costs of their investments in the region" (Cumming as cited in Mbah, 2020, para. 14).

Therefore, the rise of ISCAP has an impact on a large number of international actors, especially the multinational companies in Mozambique, as those seem to be the target of ISCAP. In fact, ISCAP activists might consider that they have contributed to the systemic poverty entrenched in this area. According to some activists, oil companies support the local government's policy and "plunder the resources" (Lister, 2020, p. 39) of the region, as indicated in their declaration of July 03, 2020. The insurgents attacked a vehicle belonging to Fenix Construction (Lister, 2020), a subcontractor of *Total,* which is a French company operating the "Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) project in Africa (…) estimated to be worth US$60bn (£44bn) with investment from countries including the UK" (Gardner, 2021, para. 4). Most importantly, "the eviction of thousands of people from their homes and livelihoods," due to the presence of resource energy companies in the region "has created consternation and social stress among the population, providing fertile ground for militant recruitment" (Mangena & Pherudi, 2020, p. 353). Furthermore, "given permission by the government in Maputo to settle the land to remove the rubies and the natural gas, these firms have returned little to the people of the north" (Prashad, 2020, para. 7); and, therefore, "assuage people's sense that they have been abandoned by the government while big foreign multinationals sweep in and reap the benefits of the country's precious natural resources" (Gardner, 2021, para. 21).

ISCAP has not particularly targeted Western officials and diplomats in the DRC or Mozambique. Nonetheless, it is important to note that in 2018, the United States embassy temporarily closed in the DRC's capital *Kinshasa* in response to a potential terrorist threat emanating from a Tanzanian cell within the Allied Democratic Forces (Barnett, 2020; Africanews, 2018). Furthermore, peace operations could become much more difficult in a region already controlled by more than one hundred armed groups (Burke, 2019). The Islamic State announced in May 2019 that ISCAP fighters attacked three barracks of the Congolese army and United Nations "crusader forces" near Mavivi (Kelly, 2019, para. 2). A subsequent statement from ISIS propaganda agency, *Amaq,* mentioned that ISIS fighters attacked three military bases located on Highway 4 near Beni, clashing with the Congolese military and U.N. peacekeepers MONUSCO for three hours (Kelly, 2019).

One cannot affirm with certainty that ISCAP activists in the DRC will extend their attacks to all international entities in the region, such as the Canadian owned company, Katanga Mining Limited, which is involved in cobalt and cooper production (Makosso, 2020). However, ISCAP might follow the same path already taken by other Islamist groups in Africa, such as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). As the Government of Canada's list of terrorist entities shows, ISGS "is suspected to have attacked a Canadian mining company convoy in 2019" and has claimed responsibility for kidnapping and killing a Canadian mine geologist in Burkina Faso in 2019 (Public Safety Canada, 2019, para. 2). Therefore, the emergence of ISCAP in the DRC might threaten security and trading interests of several international actors, such as Canada (Moyer as cited in Archutowski & Patel, 2020, p. 144).

The Youth

If extremist and terrorist activities today represent a real danger for states and societies due to the impact at the political, social, and economic level, the composition of many of these extremist groups is a source of great concern. Today, the involvement of young Africans in terrorist activities and violent extremism is a major challenge, since the African youth under 25 years old represents 60% of the continent today (The Agence Francaise de Developpement, 2019; Dews, 2019). Most importantly, in thirty years, "35% of young people around the world will be African, whereas this proportion only stood at 15%" 20 years ago (The Agence Francaise de Developpement, 2019, para. 1).

Unfortunately, youth social exclusion, discrimination, unemployment, and the lack of educational opportunities may serve as catalysts for a radicalization process (Centre Africain d'Etudes et de Recherche sur le Terrorisme, 2019). More specifically, extreme poverty experienced by young people, despite the recent discovery of vast gas reserves in the Rovuma basin

in Mozambique, could worsen the feeling of marginalization and inequality and, thus, foster the radicalization process (Fabricius, 2020). In his analysis of the jihadist insurgency in Mozambique, Lister (2020) notes that certain factors have favoured the exponential growth of the jihadist insurgency in Mozambique:

> a traditional Islamic leadership out of touch with younger, radicalized Muslims; widespread economic and social deprivation in northern Mozambique amid a wealth of natural resources, compounded by ethnic cleavages; corruption and ineffective governance; and security forces that are poorly equipped, trained, and led (p. 35).

Therefore, jihadist organizations, such as ISCAP, may increase their ranks by exploiting young people's psychological distress; anger about perceived inequalities and injustice, sadness and depression; and declining trust in state institutions.

The *United Nations Development Program* study on the dynamics of extremist recruitment highlights that discontent and lack of confidence in the government and state's security forces are common in parts of Africa with the highest incidence of violent extremism (Bureau régional pour l'Afrique du Programme des Nations Unies pour le développement, 2017). Over half of those surveyed (75%) have no trust in politicians, officials, or state security mechanisms (Bureau régional pour l'Afrique du Programme des Nations Unies pour le développement, 2017). Furthermore, a common view amongst former extremists' recruits was that governments only defend the interests of a minority (Bureau régional pour l'Afrique du Programme des Nations Unies pour le développement, 2017). Nearly 71% of those interviewed indicated that government actions—the murder or arrest of a family member or a friend—were key factors in their decisions to join an extremist group (Bureau régional pour l'Afrique du Programme des Nations Unies pour le développement, 2017). In Mozambique, general mistrust in the security forces is seen in the discourses of some ISCAP activists: "we occupy the towns to show that the government of the day is unfair. It humiliates the poor and gives the profit to the bosses" (BBC, 2020, para. 18).

Moreover, in addition to the desire for an Islamic government in Mozambique, some activists may consider that they are mainly defending a *just cause* due to "the alleged abuses of the Mozambican's military against the local populations" (BBC, 2020, para. 20). Therefore, young people who feel politically and socially marginalized could become vulnerable to ISCAP's recruitment.

Conclusion

ISCAP fighters do not seem to be driven solely by religious beliefs but by poor socio-economic conditions and local political factors as well. ISCAP's activities have cause the displacement of thousands of people; many civilians, police officers, and soldiers have been killed as a result of their attacks. Furthermore, their operations have an impact on Western economic interests. The extent of the relationship between ISIS and ISCAP is indeed unclear. However, whether or not this relationship is strong, the danger of ISCAP is real, as its activities affect the region's political stability and economic development. This article highlights, nonetheless, that no African region today is immune to jihadist radicalization. Yesterday, jihadists groups were prominent in North Africa, Mali, and Nigeria. Today, there seems to be an increase in the number of jihadist activities in Cameroon and Mozambique. Tomorrow, jihadists groups might expand to the Republic of Congo or Gabon, as those low-income countries, rich in natural resources, are also ravaged by political and economic problems.

Therefore, greater efforts are needed to ensure the region's stability, and a holistic approach is crucial to tackling some of the region's security problems. Due to the complexity of terrorism and violent extremism, several approaches are required to tackle jihadist groups such as ISCAP, including the support of neighboring countries and international and local organizations and significant human and financial resources. Besides foreign military training and regional cooperation, a social and economic approach to the conflict is also required. Dialogue between different demographics should be promoted to mitigate intergenerational conflict. Public policies should focus on raising young people's awareness of radicalization, but most importantly, economic and civic empowerment remain essential to mitigate the factors of instability. Social and economic programs are the sine qua non-condition for greater stability in the region. Therefore, the root causes of violent extremism need to be addressed, so the current social environment does not contribute to fostering radicalization among the Mozambican, the Congolese, or the Central African youth.

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