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Centre de Recherches et d'Études Géostratégiques
Center for Geostrategic Research and Studies

TERRORISM AND COVID19 IN MOZAMBIQUE AND THE SAHEL

SEPTEMBER 2020

PREFACE

This series of Atlantis Policy Briefs offers early efforts from a fast growing member in the very promising African branch of the international think tank community. Atlantis is a broadly-conceived internationally-focused research center that is interested in generating research of its own, and in promoting the work of colleagues across its community.

Atlantis, based in Casablanca, is aptly named. The geo-strategic Atlantic community joins Europe and Africa with the Americas. Atlantis is active as a convener of colleagues on urgent issues of continental importance, operating fluently in English, French and Arabic. Atlantis is known as the prime mover of the Africa Security Forum, already a major continental gathering. Atlantis is also a founding member of the Casablanca Club, an association of African research centers and Think Tanks.

The initial focus of this series of Atlantis Policy Briefs plays from Atlantis's core strengths in the security and risk management fields. It promises to be a valuable contribution to ongoing discourse in areas that are typically among the most troubling and resource consuming, in this case, tracking trends in political violence into an age of pandemics. As a policy brief, this initial effort speaks to the urgent importance of local catalysts in sustainable solutions that matter.

As a priority for Atlantis, this series of briefs will address some of the most pressing challenges to building resilient futures with the youngest of our global demographics, on our most ancient of continents. We all share in the promise of their ultimate success. And so this series of Policy Briefs offers much more than an academic exercise. Others will follow.

Dr. Steven Fleischmann
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Policy Brief

September 2020

Terrorism and COVID-19
Mozambique and the Sahel

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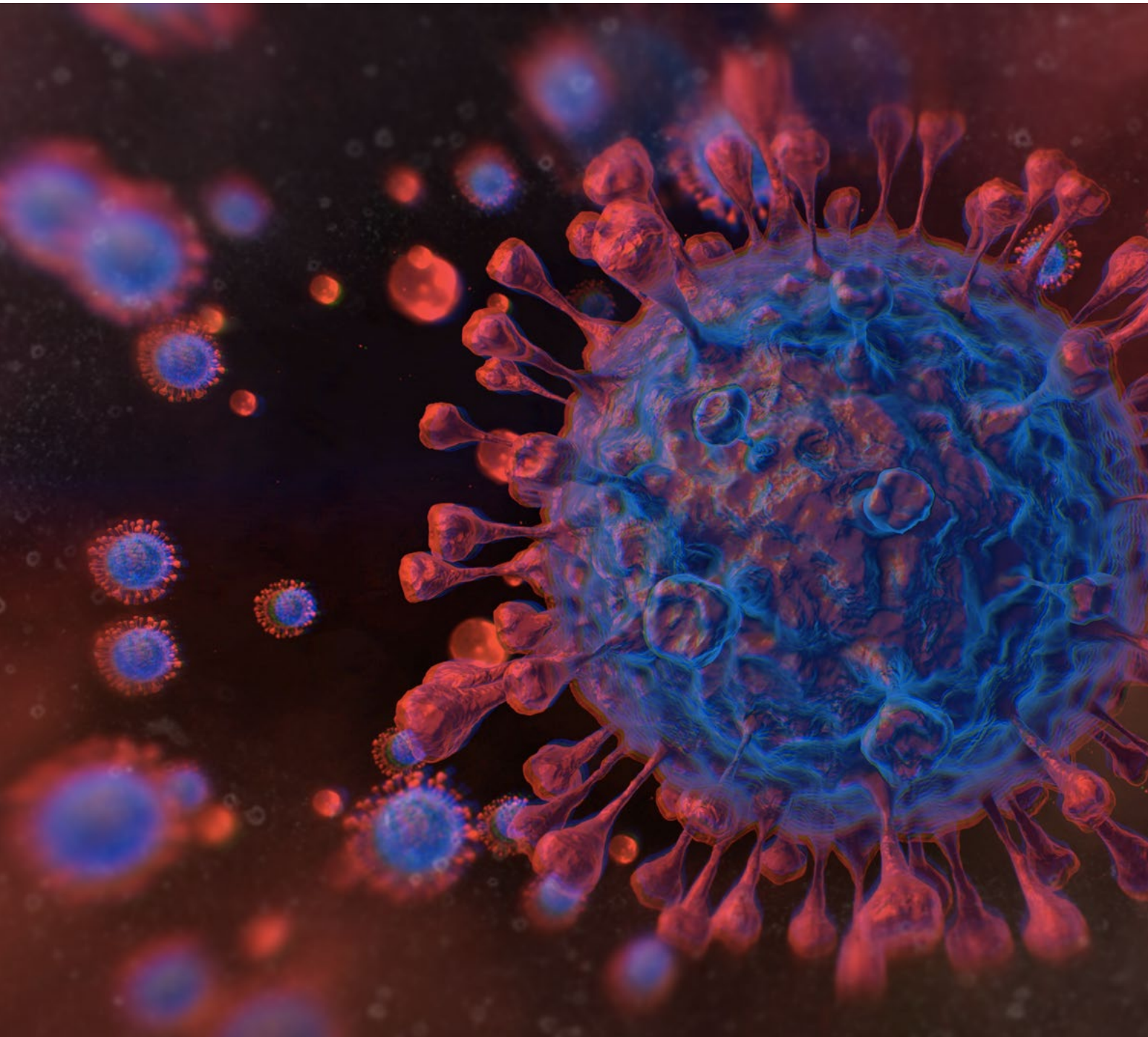
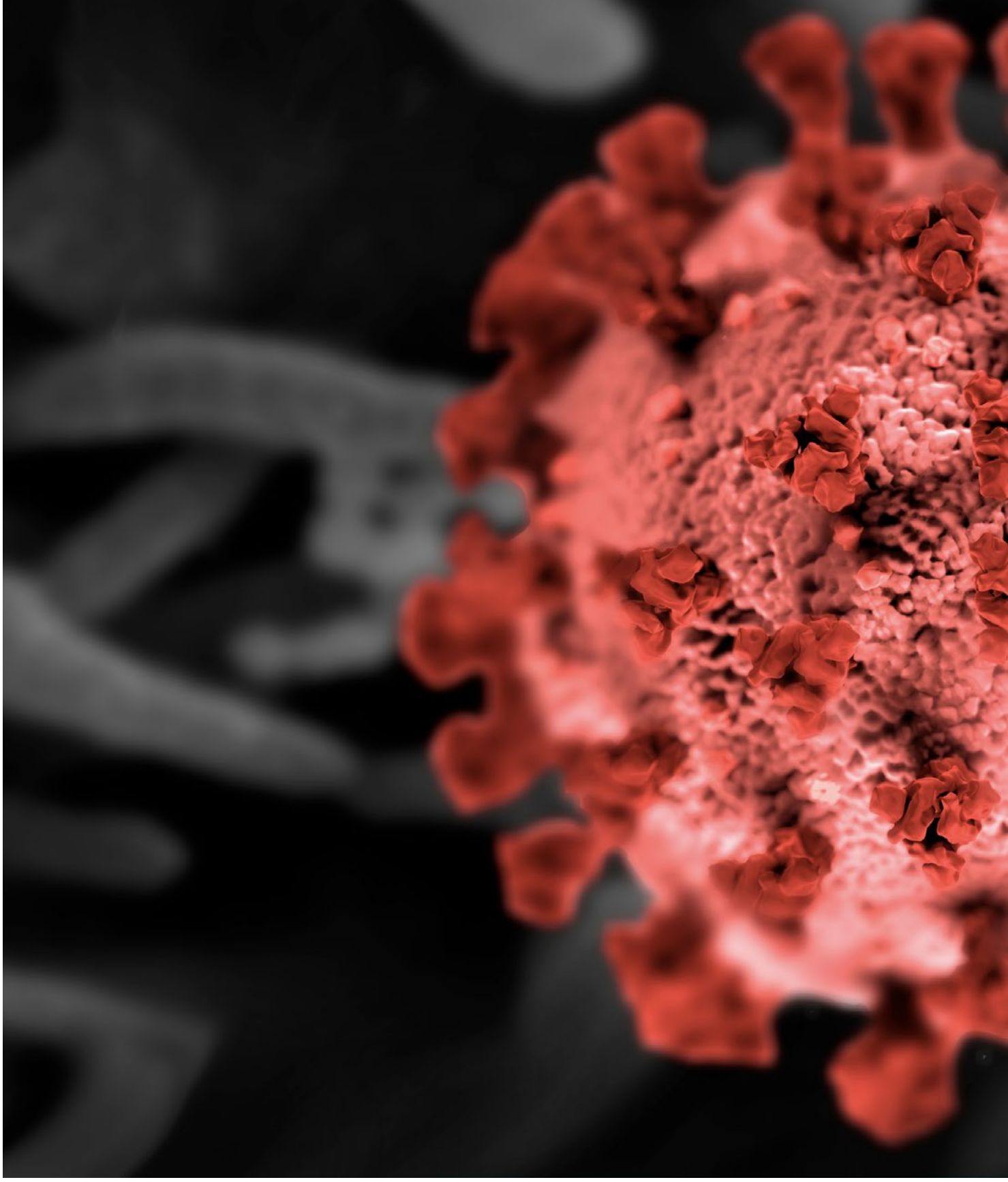


TERRORISM AND COVID-19
MOZAMBIQUE AND THE SAHEL:
PANDEMIC EFFECTS ON ACTIVITY

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 crisis has caused rising concern about terrorists taking advantage of the pandemic. This paper looks at the geo-strategic situations in Mozambique and the Sahel as cases, and argues that while there has been an increase in terrorist activity, a comparison between pre-Spring 2020 and the period following suggests no direct COVID-19 effect, or one that is yet to appear distinctly. Increasingly adverse effects on anti-terrorism efforts are likely to appear eventually, however, in line with growing impacts on government resources, military operations, local economics, and broad strains on society exacerbated in violence-afflicted areas.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 is growing into a massive strategic challenge for Africa that could not only make established regional insurgencies more intractable, but also plunge targeted areas and the states that purport to govern them further into precarity.



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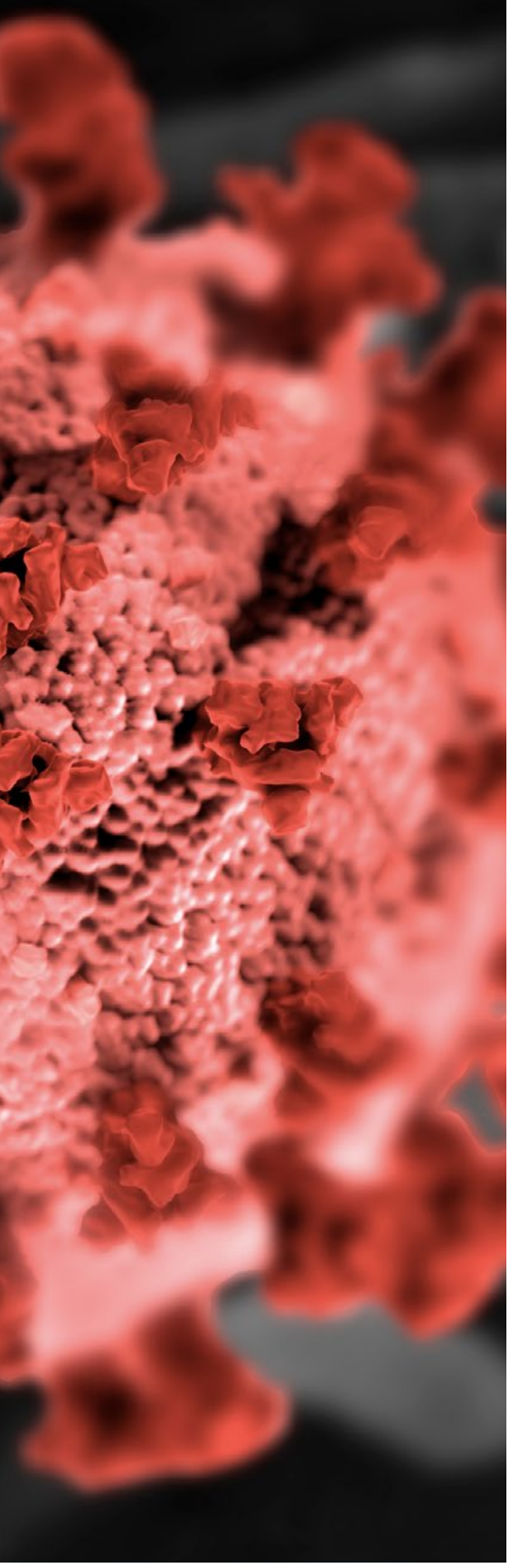

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INTRODUCTION

Terrorist activity in Africa, particularly in Mozambique and the Sahel, has increased over the years reaching a particularly high tempo in the Spring of 2020.

Mozambique's oil-rich Cabo Delgado region has been subject to intense violence by Islamic State (IS) affiliate Ahlu Sunna wa Jamaa, locally known as al Shabaab (AS) (organizationally unrelated to the better-known Somali al Shabaab despite potential migratory links) since late 2017.[1]

The states of the Sahel have been fighting several groups, including Boko Haram, also known as the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) since at least[2] 2002, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, and AQ-linked Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM).[3]

With rampant poverty and corruption, both AQ and IS affiliates have spread throughout Africa, which — between sub-national and international terrorism[4]—is and has been the most terrorist-afflicted continent for quite some time.[5]

By the same token, attacks in western Africa have been occurring at a much higher incidence; over 59% more in April 2020 than the same period the year before[6], and over five times more this February compared to 2016.[7]

Hence, in light of the ongoing health crisis with the spread of Covid-19, analysts have been quick to note that the pandemic is at the very least partly to blame for the rise in terrorism – even the United Nations Secretary General's (UNSG) assessment reflected this,"terrorist groups are taking advantage of the socio-medico Covid-19 pandemic to intensify their attacks in the Sahel".[8]

While we will conclude that the beliefs reflected in the UNSG's statement are not fully substantiated – the pandemic as opportunity has not escaped terrorist strategic communications, evident by IS calling the pandemic a "divine punishment" in its journal Al Naba.[9] Nonetheless, it still seems hasty to join the UNSG in reaching this conclusion, particularly before the pandemic's full disruptive effects have been felt in Africa.[10]

This paper focuses on and analyzes the geo-strategic situations to date in Mozambique and the Sahel, which appear to be in particularly precarious positions, in part due to ongoing increases in violence during a period of increasing socio-medical impacts from the pandemic.

A note on terminology. While acknowledging the contentiousness of partisan labelling surrounding the definitions of "terrorism" and "insurgency," this paper adopts the convention of using both interchangeably as shorthand to describe "political actors using asymmetrically violent means to attain their political ends." [11]

The reasoning for interchangeability adopted here is that both cases have foreign (terrorism) and indigenous (insurgency) elements, and both are seeking governance destabilization (via insurgency) and regional (if not global) influence amplification through demonstrative acts of violence (via terrorism) – and so both reflect insurgent and terrorist qualities that are probably not usefully unpicked.

There is also a pejorative and politicized variant in the use of the term "terrorism" to justify extra-judicial state-led military or police suppression. Neither case suffers this state-led variant as a driving definitional problem, in large part because it does not apply to either case. The organs of state are either not available, not looking for justifications nor functioning effectively enough to achieve suppression in either of the two cases.

So, this paper employs both terrorism and insurgency without resolving the admittedly controversial aspects of how the shorthand adoption of these terms may be in use elsewhere.

At the end of this paper, we conclude both case studies with a provisional observation that, although we cannot say that the pandemic has not contributed to a rise in violent political activity, for the time being the pandemic does not yet seem to be a driving factor, neither in causing an uptick in violence nor in failures to reduce it.

Indeed, it is possible that a perceived increase in attacks is in part due to a temporary drop in the visibility of terrorist acts in the media, leading to the belated perception of a considerable rise according to observers. We simply lack perspective on this point at this time. Conversely, it would also be a remission to write off addressing the situation as we can expect it to likely evolve, particularly in areas of known pressure, such as migration within the continent and out from it through refugee flows, as well as for growing discontent with state actions due to stringent pandemic circuit breaker methods.[12]Thus, while terrorist activity might not 'yet' be increasing due to the pandemic, anti-terrorism efforts do seem to be becoming more and more affected.

ANALYZING COVID-19'S EFFECTS ON TERRORIST ACTIVITY

Boiling down the current rise as primarily due to Covid-19 is at best an early conclusion for a problem that has clearly been significantly getting worse over time. While it may seem simple enough to deem the pandemic as exacerbating violence in Africa, taking a deeper look into how the current situation compares with periods prior to the arrival of this virus helps shine a light into what can be a complex relationship between immediate cause, catalyzing conditions and political (and social) violence's onward effect.

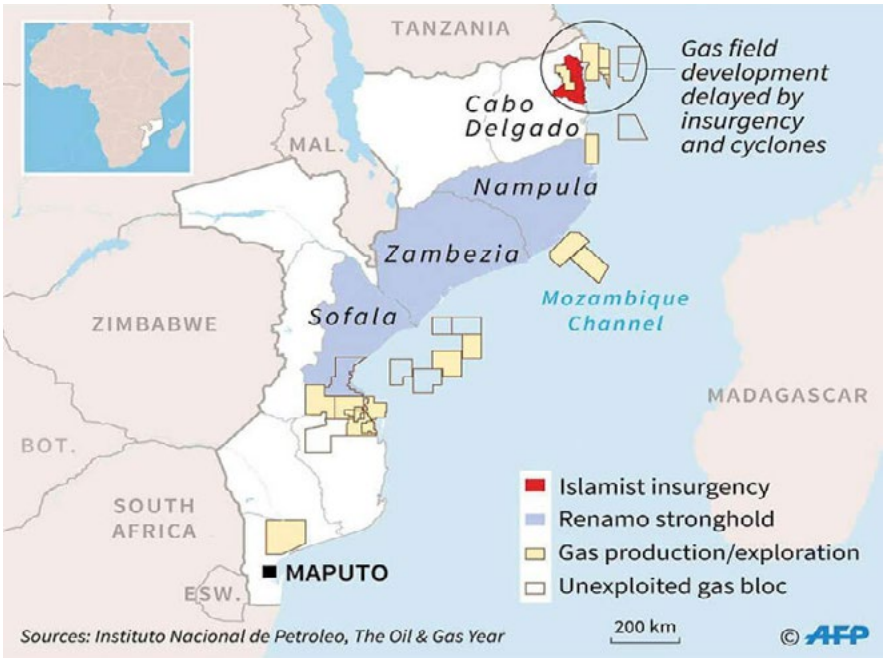
Terrorism incidents had been on the rise and rising over the years. Before the pandemic, there were complex push and pull factors behind terrorism, such as backlash against globalization, neutralization of available remedies through corruption or the various enticements offered by terrorist movements respectively.[13]

On the other hand, pandemic effects and related accelerants may be a growing factor, and governments would be wise to expect them to be a growing burden as well on their ability to respond to the prospect. Such an analysis permits the identification of key areas where the pandemic could be or could become an aggravating element. But among the groups seeking to exploit the pandemic to their advantage, there is a notable divergence between rhetoric and operational guidance.

Groups such as ISIS are busily outlining plans for the pandemic period with one called 'Crusaders' Biggest Nightmare,' supposedly aiming to leverage the crisis.[14] ISIS is at the same time warning followers not to travel to virus-stricken areas.[15] It seems difficult to pinpoint a resonant amplitude let alone a strategy for recombining virus-driven terrorist rhetoric with guidance for virus-driven activity.

Pre-Spring 2020

This section will offer a perspective on the pre-Covid-19 period for contrast with the current situation for both Mozambique and the Sahel, followed by an overall analysis of what seems to follow from the contrast.



Mozambique

Prior to the current period of concern *(Spring-Summer 2020)*, the evidence points to a significant rise in terrorist activity. Indeed, indexing terrorism in the world's 6th poorest country[16] shows that between 2010 and 2018, activity rose over fourteen times from a low 0.39 index to a 5.54 out of a hypothetical 10, gauging the direct and indirect impacts of terrorism.[17]

More specific to this study is the Cabo Delgado province insurgency, which intensified in late 2017 though violence rose significantly in the second half of 2019.[18]

Cabo Delgado has been under attack due to a complex cocktail of factors, cultural legacies, underlying corruption, a heavy toll from civil war against the Mozambique National Resistance (RENAMO),[19] and the disposition of local access to the nearby and near-term promise of transformative capital inflows for global-scale natural resources.

In mid-February 2020, before the start of the pandemic crisis, the escalation of the threat in Cabo Delgado had been broached at the African Union (AU). The reflexive perception is that the deterioration of conditions in Cabo Delgado was not addressed at this venue up until then. "[T]here had been little or no mention of Mozambique at the AU."[20] Mozambique had struggled through a political transition and a massive sovereign debt corruption spanning that transition.[21] At the same time, the government was doing what it could to encourage sustained and possibly overwhelming foreign capital flows that promised unprecedented material wealth. Given the acuity of unblinkered hindsight, it would be uncontroversial to label the emerging situation in Cabo Delgado as escalating to untenable at a rapid pace. It may not seem fair to criticize the proverbial fire team while they are still fighting the fire. But it might be instructive to use the case to probe further, as the risk of such fires seems to many to be on the rise across the continent, without factoring in the pandemic effect.

Moreover, not addressing preventable failures in reducing Africa's geo/socio-political fire risk seems negligent as it threatens the welfare of Africans and their future prospects across the continent. So, in the spirit of lowering the fire risk elsewhere, that apart from the selected cases, these generic questions rise to the fore :

/ Was there a failure of policy behind a pattern of delay, inaction or silence with regard to rising geo/socio-political pressure and disruption risk?

/ If so, was there more at work than a failure of policy to keep up with the tempo needed for effective response?

/ Was there a policy beyond failure to include suppression of general awareness of rising threats? Were there identifiable local factors in that suppression?

/ If either, was there a policy to avoid the airing of unfavorable trends and increasing risk to foreign investment?

/ If so, did the policy undermine effective risk mitigation, such as reaching out for broader concerted efforts in a timely fashion to counter extremist attacks? [22]

In Mozambique, it seems all five questions are readily affirmed. The main issue seems due to the government pushing its Cabo Delgado problem to a side view while fossil fuel investments and promises of unprecedented riches stayed front and center.

Though massive offshore natural gas fields were discovered in 2010, these have only seen development and production in the past few years; this 'failed promise' having given the Cabo Delgado terrorists a major boost.[23]

With Total having bought out Anadarko's Mozambican assets in September 2019, and having taken over its role in looking to build Mozambique's first liquefied natural gas (LNG) onshore plant, there have been reports alleging contribution to further militarization and tensions in the Cabo Delgado region.[24]

While this relatively gargantuan $20 billion gas project is nonetheless likely to lead to some much-needed debt financing and job creation for Mozambique, the increased intensity of the ongoing insurgency will continue to pose major risks to the project.[25]

Indeed, AS is poised to seek to target these contentious natural gas investments and facilities. Coupled with Mozambique's extremely high corruption perception index (146 out of 180 in these rankings – where higher is not better), this convergence points toward this not becoming a conflict "coming to Mozambique but rather another malignant side effect of the culture of corruption that prevails in the country."[26]

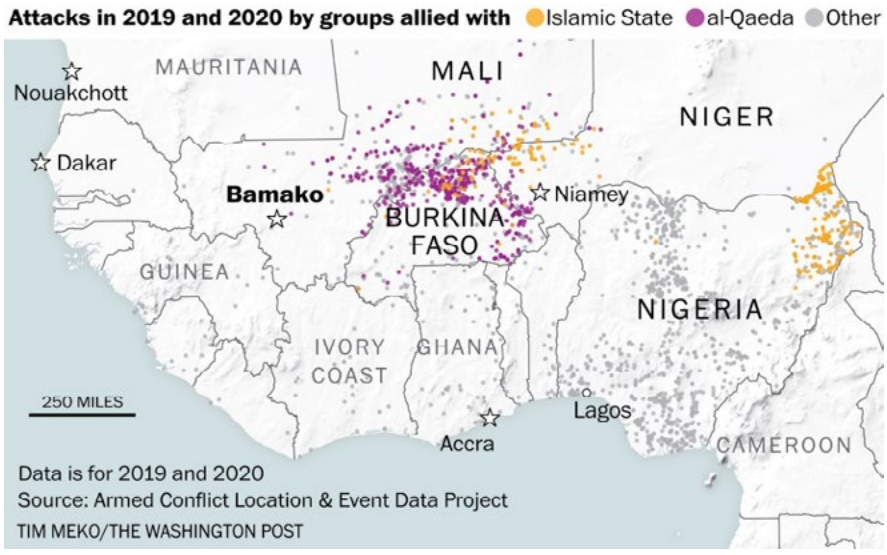
The evidence in hindsight is fairly clear. Tensions and increased radicalization in the area appear to have been ignored until it was clearly too late on October 5, 2017.[27] Indications up to this point highlight more mundane drivers like poverty, misery, and strife, despite or possibly because of a global-scale resource that was clearly attracting massive foreign investment interests.

By then, early October now almost three years ago, radicalization was able to deploy a message to "never mind the large deposits of mineral resources"[28] nor to attach value to the trumpeted foreign investor local content programs that were ostensibly designed to mitigate imbalance in the area and spread the wealth.

There are many lessons to be learned here, no doubt, but there is ample evidence of laying out of tinder for the fire to come, years before the pandemic had begun to have its impact.

Attacks in the Sahel

Fighters affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have launched scores of attacks across West Africa in attempt to take control of territory.



Sahel

The Sahel has long and increasingly been troubled by terrorism. Groups such as Boko Haram have existed for nearly twenty years.[29] To put it metaphorically, a major cork came out of the Sahelian bottle in 2011 when the Qaddafi regime collapsed. Its successors dropped the bottle, and the binding agents of the regime fell

untied, leaving an unleashed desert djinn in its heat and dust prowling for unquenchable conflict and vengeance.

The impact of the Sahelian strife echoes across Europe and Africa. Neighbors and regional powers were not in a position to catch what slipped from Qaddafi's grasp; what poured out turned out to be extraordinarily volatile. Getting the djinn back in has proven impossible. The August 2020 coup in Mali is only the latest echo.[30]

Combined with worsening security and what might be seen as spreading political vacuums, these states have left major gaps for indigenous and foreign terrorist groups to exploit.

In response, much of which was in place before Qaddafi collapsed. There have been several foreign military operations present in the Sahel or nearby, notably the French Operation Barkhane and the UN's Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) – where pushing the threat back up to northern Mali was the immediate focus for regional counterterrorism efforts.[31] Though, aggravated with poor governance, ethnic cleansing and the subcontracting of efforts for defense against violent militias, the Sahel situation has been getting progressively worse.[32] In March 2019, there were over 400 terrorism related deaths in the Sahel[33] as well as for receiving over 57 out of 82 attacks in Africa in the same period.[34] It may be unsurprising to see that attacks have increased five times since 2016.[35] The situation has gotten so dire over the years that, according to a 2019 UN study, there are nearly one million displaced due to terrorism in the region.[36]

Moreover, there have been conflicting messages and dwindling involvement from certain key actors who might have the means to help make a difference. Of note particularly is growing dissonance from US policy, with its peerless airborne logistics and intelligence, planning to end aid to ground-focused French forces while at the same time pledging more support to the region for countering waves of terrorism, but formulating the terms of support as if the real objective is to counter growing Chinese influence.[37]

Taking a step back to look at both cases, given challenges, worsening trends and incoherent response, it seems plain that, prior to the coronavirus outbreak, the situation in each was already nearly untenable and rapidly deteriorating. In both of our cases, the pandemic is clearly not yet the decisive factor.

In the Sahel, the causes may be due to several issues that span the proverbial Libyan bottle remaining uncorked in the north and the now epic Nigerian failure to keep its arms on its side of the struggle in the South — but neither have been decisively impacted by the pandemic, yet. Further sustaining the spread of Sahel terrorism[38] are likely to also be rudderless and underfunded Sahel bureaucracies entrusted with critical tasks to sort out without effective domestic or foreign leadership, let alone the unformed strategic agenda of the 2014-founded Francophone G5 Sahel (G5S) organization *(Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso)*, which France can only nudge so far[39] and which does not appear to have taken an actionable look at the bigger picture in limiting the spread of terror to its neighbors.[40]

The Current Situation

Mozambique

Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province has been facing a barrage of attacks for the past couple of months — since the outbreak — whether that is opportunistic and a consequence of the arrival of the pandemic virus or not is more complex. Indeed, since March, there has been a surge in attacks including an AS ransack of the port city of Mocimboa da Praia, one of the most important in the province, on March 24th[41] and an April 7 massacre of 52 villagers around Muidumbe[42] — both among many others. In the same period, the country has also been hit by two cyclones leaving around 2.2 million in dire need of help.[43] In total, 101 violent incidents and over 285 fatalities have been recorded[44] between January 1st and April 25th.

Furthermore, there are indications that IS affiliates in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique and perhaps Somalia might combine, though that is still seen as very much a long shot by some observers.[45] This is similar to the purported mergers in the Sahel of groups of with varied claims and generally decentralized command and control—only time will tell—though it still seems unlikely that anything more difficult than strategic communications and symbolic alliances would come out of this.

Further radicalization also remains very possible due to violent, indiscriminate responses by both government forces and the private military contractors that assist and occasionally replace them. Further antagonization of locals are a classic recipe, pushing the insurgent narrative and support for increasing the tempo of attacks and expanding the base[46] for sustaining operations.

An increased 'hearts and minds' campaigns on the part of AS already seem to be gaining traction. While they have killed and displaced many, there has also been a demonstrable willingness to communicate and address the disenfranchised.[47]

The AS public messaging states that AS is on the side of Muslims and the poor, who fairly speaking may not all be Muslim, unlike its purported sponsor IS, which prefers to depict AS as broadly targeting Christians.[48] This seems to indicate some kind of divergence in appeal between the Mozambique-based AS and IS, offering itself as the AS 'parent organization.'

This divergence though, is not uncommon in insurgent organizations, often portraying themselves as an appealing higher agency poised to eliminate legitimacy-sapping corruption, though they rarely ever deliver.[49]

Place this strategy into the context of a socio-medical health crisis, insurgent groups like AS might reasonably expect to reap benefits from fundamental government failures to protect and provide. Gaining further leverage with increasing pressure of the pandemic will be attractive. Increasing attacks to amplify that effect can be reasonably expected to sweep in causes that may not have directly arisen due to the arrival of the virus. Poor health care delivery, aggravating pandemic impacts and haphazardly violent government interventions and for-hire military services can all amplify the desired insurgent effect.

The terrorism-to-insurgency effect will be magnified as targeted hearts and minds increasingly identify themselves with those, in effect their surrogates, being killed by the entity supposedly being deployed to heal, protect or defend them. If that entity is broadly seen to be the national government, it goes on this way until political separation enters the picture as the true objective of the violence.
If states aim to quell and revert this progression towards devastation, all of this will have to be convincingly reset at a visceral level of agency, accountability and responsibility, if any in their care are once again are to reflexively expect government to protect and provide.

Sahel

Similar to Mozambique, the Sahel states have been facing increasing violent incidents during the 'period' of the pandemic, particularly around the Lake Chad basin,[50] including areas of Chad, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic, as well as in the Liptako-Gourma triangle between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso.[51] Indeed, on March 23, Boko Haram attacked a military base in Boma, Chad killing over 98 and increased attacks on Burkina Faso.[52]

With states like Mali voting unanimously to fund and train local militias that have been known to target particular ethnic groups like the Fulani, it is unsurprising that tensions would rise[53] with low political trust and an imminent threat of death from all sides. Moreover, while there is a more important terrorist presence in Mali and Burkina Faso in general, similarly to how fighting in Mali pushed terrorism into Burkina Faso, now spreading into Togo, Benin and Ghana. The under-resourced alliance of the G5 has not been looking at the bigger picture enough to focus on slowing this trend.[54]

Moreover, the late 2019 to early 2020 attacks against military targets in Mali like those of Mondoro, Boulkessy or Indelimane have opened the way for further spread into Niger as seen with

the Inates, Sanam and Chinagodar attacks which have led to over 400 military casualties.[55] The process of ramping up insurgent activity had already taken headway before the crisis. Some observers have noted that the continued merger between ISGS and ISWAP in March 2019 is now bearing fruit and leading to a rise in attacks – clearly pre-dating and unrelated to Covid-19. Though, as with the argument about Covid-19 being absolutely a reason to plan for intensified terrorist activity, the answer is more complex as there is no central command structure or united basis between Mali and Chad.[56]

This move toward greater cohesion across the two does not appear to be becoming any more of an pressing issue for now. The coup in Mali is not a sign of stability, although it may serve as a wakeup call for the region and supporting outside powers.

Not all outside powers are necessarily supporting. Launching from the opposite end of the Mediterranean, it will be interesting to see how or whether Turkey gets its wheels caught in the same Sahel ruts trying to pursue a recently renewed North African agenda, partnered with a cast of Misrata-led militias with Ottoman-era Libyan links, pan-Islamists, Qatari funding, redeployed Syrian surrogates, the Muslim Brotherhood and various affiliates. Or the Libyan tribal and army remnants, Russians, Egyptians, Emiratis, and a host of others there for the pay, who seem to be actively engaged in opposing them. The scorecard may soon be getting difficult to keep.

Analysis

It would seem obviously difficult to make the case that the coronavirus pandemic has been responsible for an ongoing rise in terrorist activity in our two cases. What lays ahead is less clear. Even though it is possible that lack of access to health facilities and social distancing measures might have increased discontentment and support for fringe groups, it would seem unlikely that there will be a direct causal relationship with pandemic effects and increased attacks. A pandemic-weakened state response is hard to see as having a more intense impact but it may lead to a broader one if states grow enfeebled, informal economies collapse, and violence fills reachable vacuums.

More simply put, terrorist organizations have not been encouraged by the arrival of the pandemic[57] any more than they have been by preceding and ongoing government fecklessness in opposing them. That is not to say that the crisis will not prove impactful in the long-run. Indeed, as terrorist organizations adapt to the new context, with increased economic disparities, loss of jobs, and tensions of various kinds, these organizations are likely to take advantage of these and increase the number of individuals on their payrolls, leading to more chaos and possibly more violence.

As far as activity goes, on the one hand, there most definitely has been a rise in the past couple of years, particularly in 2020, though terrorist movements had already been intensifying their attacks since earlier this year prior to the internationalization of the crisis.[58]

On the other hand, as stated in the introduction, it would be remiss to ignore the potential, culminating influence of the pandemic on state affairs and social discontent from damage, death and hardship already blamed on government hostility and incompetence and now, possibly, to be further associated with pandemic public health measures.[59]

COVID-19'S EFFECTS ON RESPONSES

For Mozambique, to place this insurgency as a new form of terror would be misguided, with a civil war lasting over 15 years and a small, somewhat disenfranchised Muslim population in the north, it is unsurprising that tensions have led to such developments.[60]

It will be very important to study the impact of Covid-19 on responses, whether those of foreign and local militaries, economic, and pandemic related measures. Indeed, while it is difficult currently to document an unambiguous obvious link between pandemic pressure and increased terrorist activity, there is no doubt that its weakening effects will be increasingly felt and there may already soon be a case to document how the pandemic complicates counterinsurgency efforts.

Based on attack information and conflict evolution, it does not yet appear that there is a direct causal relationship between Covid-19 and increased attacks. For research, and to avoid dramatic sweeping statements, providing an overview of several of the factors that are connected to counterterrorism that include how the pandemic has affected them would better serve research on the current security crisis in western and south eastern Africa.

Foreign forces are coping and responding to some of their soldiers getting infected.[61] Affected states are spending precious resources on keeping already weak economies afloat.[62] Gauging the overall effectiveness of lockdown measures and closed borders with increasingly dangerous sub-continental migratory flows,[63] the impact of coronavirus infection has undoubtedly had an adverse effect on counterinsurgency readiness and regional political priorities that preserve it. Indeed, weakened states and ineffective measures open the door to a more intense fight, especially for hearts and minds.[64]

Foreign and Local Military Forces

Military forces fighting against terrorism have needed to adapt themselves to consider the operational disruption caused by a fast-spreading by respiratory disease while trying not to fall back from mission critical activities.

Many observers assumed that there would be massive withdrawals in French forces from the Sahel, projecting over 4000 cases[65] *(although that number remained a possibility, there were only around 867 declared cases in April).*[66] In terms of cases in MINUSMA, only 26 cases were declared in April. Despite this, operations stayed intensive with continued patrolling and even deploying over 600 people for overseeing legislative elections in Mali.[67] *(Although the swift military coup in August seems to have cancelled the impact of that bravery in April.)*

Furthermore, in terms of international military support and MINUSMA in particular, while the US has been trying to limit involvement, there have still not been any substantial cuts in this area.[68]

Indeed, French forces and their partners have even managed to eliminate AQIM's emir, Abdelmalek Droukdal[69] on June 6. The major powers coalition has put in place many measures to control involvement without removing forces, such as slowing down rotations to ensure continued, smooth peacekeeping missions.[70] Eleven European states banded together and sent a new task force to Mali called Takuba on April 3.[71]

In that sense, foreign militaries, feared to depart due to pandemic-related reasons, are very much trying to continue their role, as difficult and sometimes frustratingly unsuccessful as it may be.

In Mozambique, while there is not yet a large international contingent like in the Sahel, the country has greatly relied on private military corporations such as the Russian Wagner Group, and the South African Dyck Advisory Group,[72] allegedly to counter the Islamic insurgency in Cabo Delgado. In the case of both, the loss of mining jobs in the regions has added to the availability of aging ex-mercenaries from decades earlier.[73]

Suffice to say that after suffering high levels of casualties and with little progress against the opposing forces, the Russians were said to have pulled back from defending the state in March.[74] In this aspect, it is possible that Covid-19 fears might have hastened the redeployment of Russian private military contractors, though it seems that for the most part the decision was operational.

By the same token, although South Africa has been discussing aiding its northern neighbor,[75] nothing has yet come of the talk, possibly partly due to South Africa's increasing concern with its own Covid-19 cases.[76] With rising infection rates in regional powers like South Africa and Angola, it makes action seem unlikely on behalf of Maputo.[77] The Cabo Delgado situation was discussed at a Southern African Development Community (SADC) summit in May but a disunited SADC with no clear strategies and Mozambique taking nearly two years to bring up the problem[78] definitely kept momentum off the table. If anything, the pandemic might serve to extenuate SADC idling through the crisis in Cabo Delgado.

While it appears operating forces have been trying to adapt, especially in the Sahel, the coronavirus is likely to be making military activity increasingly difficult from strategic to the tactical levels. Coupled with deteriorating economies, Covid-19's multifaceted impact in complicating counterinsurgency efforts becomes more systemic and more apparent. Reinforcing efforts will be needed to focus the G5, AU and SADC on critical effectiveness in keeping pace with the dynamic natures of transnational insurgencies and groups supporting acts of terrorism.

Improving state integration and military cooperation, already hard to establish and difficult to sustain, remains needed and more necessary with each day in both of our cases.

Economic Situation and Activities

Preparing for an imminent crisis in underdeveloped countries with fragile health infrastructures and large dispersed populations is difficult let alone feasible as an undertaking.[79] In Mali, what was done has not been working. Disruptions to supply chains have led to rises in food prices, affected agriculture, and increased the prospect of more food insecurity.[80] According to OXFAM, an estimated 33 million additional people in Africa could be needing crucial food help due to the pandemic[81] – this alone could exacerbate anti-government sentiment and provide insurgents more support.

To respond, the region has been allocating precious funds to help keep informal economies afloat. Mali is believed to have freed around 500 billion XOF or around 760 million euros,[82] though according to the Emirates Policy Center, it has so far only allocated 11 billion XOF or 16 million euros. Its neighbor Burkina Faso managed 6.3 billion XOF, or 9.5 million euros.[83] To this point, these amounts sound tiny and vulnerable to diversion.

More positively, the international community has been providing aid, such as to Mozambique in the form of disbursements from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) amounting to around 273 million euros.[84] For the G5 in the Sahel, debt erasing has been supported by France, the UN and the IMF with the reporting or cancellation of around 208 billion euros in the face value of debt.[85] Moreover, there are concerns that due to their frail economies, some states might lose progress made in past decades, particularly healthcare, which had stimulated economic growth.[86] Indeed, according to president Mahamadou Issoufou, Niger has increased its health capabilities and bettered life for its citizens through vaccination and more essential health services.[87] As an example, child vaccination against deadly diseases had increased two-fold.[88] Now, Covid-19 might ruin these advances. With increased state precarity, terrorist organizations might benefit with increased support. Further international support will be needed to limit precarity and the risk of pandemic-driven healthcare and economic collapse becoming political damage; the US plan to send surplus ventilators to Africa coupled with debt cancellation are moves in this direction.[89]

Mozambique is particularly at risk of receiving a massive economic blow due to both its ongoing insurgency and the coronavirus. Cabo Delgado is its premier oil-rich province, with the country banking on liquified natural gas investments to generate economic growth.[90] South Africa alone had been planning to invest over 53 billion euros there – though that is unlikely to happen any time soon.

Mozambique's inability to protect the region from terrorism coupled with potential further economic damage due to Covid-19 facing it and massive drops in oil prices,[91] in large part a pandemic effect after the Russo-Saudi OPEC+ rapprochement, are compounding the pressures of balancing spending and economic impacts and further limiting available resources to fight two adversaries.[92]

Indeed, with many economic interests being in the north, the crisis coupled with increased terrorist activity is likely to gravely impact projected growth. Though residents of the region were led to believe that these natural resources would bring them major benefits – particularly jobs and infrastructure – many skilled jobs have been going to foreigners, and unskilled jobs to friends and family of politicians and government officials.[93] Poverty and the not uncommon pattern of cherished land severed from communal purposes are seen as worsening the current situation, if not its cause. The global pandemic recession will be hitting the economies of Africa with magnified effect, highly dependent as most are on cash crop or commodity resource exports. Mozambique will feel disruptive drops in oil prices on their investor prospects.

Therefore, risk from insurgent activity will not be reduced by an increasingly tense situation as Africa braces for yet another wave of disease with deeply impacted economic capabilities.

While there is hope of limiting some of it with some international support and African coordination through the AU or the SADC,[94] offsetting defense needs with essential health spending may well detract from regional counterinsurgency efforts.

With Burkina Faso having over four members of its cabinet infected and its deputy speaker killed, the potential costs and damage of Covid-19 are not to be underestimated in Africa. This leads us to gauging the overall status and effectiveness of pandemic measures in our two cases.

Counter-Pandemic Measures

Due to the development and increasing infection rate of Covid-19, many African states have implemented varying levels of social distancing measures to protect themselves. These generally are not sustainable, owing to the large role the informal subsistence sector plays in national economic activity. Nonetheless, due to the initial evolving nature of the pandemic threat, many African states imposed lockdowns *(including Mozambique)* in April, some recently increasing it.[95] Despite these measures, many have been receiving strong negative feedback from local populations, severely negative in the Sahel as for Niger during Ramadan.

While Ebola is more of a medical priority by virtue of its high burn contagious lethality, COVID-19 forces more balance across medical and social concerns, with remedies absent and prevention available to date only in a weak form, in the form of a transmissibility mitigation depending on severe social disruption, one that immediately and adversely affects the smooth running of states and the high tempo economic dynamics of majority marginally stable populations in profound ways.

Indeed, there have been violent protests in Niger where citizens of the Sahelian state decried social distancing measures as anti-Islamic,[96] the deepest of invectives. This was in response to the government deciding on March 17th to close all borders, schools, entertainments, and social gatherings, which was to include mosques. In this case, restrictions have, to some extent, been helping jihadists by lowering confidence in the government. This is not an issue restricted to Niger, protests have also taken place in other countries such as Guinea where six were killed near the capital.[97] Not only might these types of protests happen increasingly with the extension of many lockdowns - especially in societies used to social contact, but it might spread the virus and overload limited health services.

A common measure applied throughout our cases and the continent is the border closure. Many concerned states are known to have particularly porous borders which permit the "influx of arms and facilitate the movements of jihadists"[98] – indeed, border security is difficult, as many African states often have lightly-trained security and intelligence agencies and many governance issues.[99] Thus, while border priorities appear to be a move in the right direction, it is evident better surveillance and border security is needed.[100] In the longer term, without needed upgrades, it seems unlikely that border closures can or will be effective for public health or security. At the same time as public health border closures were put in place, terrorist organizations have continued to take advantage of weak borders such as there are around the Lake Chad basin.[101]

Although efforts to sustain counterterrorism efforts through adapting operations and forces are ongoing, they will become more difficult as infection rates rise in the region. With much of their defense apparatus deployed throughout their territory to enforce the lockdowns, border policing is not likely to increase effectiveness from augmentation in ranks.[102]

The slope under lockdown favors spreading forces thinner and complicating counterinsurgency. Borders should continue to pursue improved security with better technology and international support.[103] Though, perhaps pessimistically, governance probably plays a more decisive role in results for the time being.

Finally, migration back to home countries due to job loss and lockdown measures is bound to happen. South Africa with the highest amount of cases in Africa shares a border with Mozambique and has a high number of Mozambican migrants. There have already been migratory flows back towards the terrorism-stricken country when, in late March, over 14,000 migrants returned home due to the economic impact of the virus.[104]

This poses a conundrum as unchecked migration in areas lacking the technology and health services for effective testing could strain resources and further spread Covid-19.[105]

Much of the Sahelian population travel across the region for trading and agriculture.[106] With halts on border trade and what are considered 'non-essential' activities, there have already been heavy impacts on populations, socially and economically. To this point, as seen earlier, closed borders are not likely to be effective in stopping the spread of terrorism though they are no doubt disrupting economically fragile locals who might be ripe for recruitment as supporters or trainees.

Further increases in economic migration flows from the Sahel to the north could also be exploited by terrorists, commandeering them to raise funds or infiltrating them to place clandestine operators and export terrorism in refugee flows.[107]

CONCLUSION

Despite analysts claiming a rise in terrorist activity due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there does not appear to be any conclusive evidence for this, yet. These are still early days. Terrorists do not seem to be particularly taking advantage of the pandemic crisis and its consequences, again for the time being. Indeed, many may realize that they are not any less prone to the first wave of disease.

On the other hand, state weakness will play to insurgent advantage. The strain the pandemic has placed on states will make counterterrorism more difficult and more dependent on regional and great power assistance, with impacts on defense operations, economics and society.

With no magical solution to insurgency or pandemic at hand, the evidence points to increased cooperation and coordination between affected states. If the pandemic is an accelerant of trends, then this may be a good sign for the future, notwithstanding the absence of the 'global ceasefire' the UNSG sought.[108] Short of it, the prospect of rising social discontent, corruption, and indiscriminate attacks on civilians will no doubt dampen optimism.[109]

Even so, it seems nothing is out of the realm of possibility in terms reversing trends if the pandemic proceeds to taking an unsustainable toll on the already heavily afflicted. With its purported accelerating effect, pandemic misery might drive our two quite hard cases faster to points where exhaustion overtakes anger.

With what might be actual geo-strategic starting points, there might also be a hollowing out of a population's willingness to act as a basis for continued terrorism and insurgency operations, effectively removing the terrorist option of operating freely among sympathizers, cutting support and strategic depth.

It may be there, at this geo-strategic point, that a strong concerted response can begin to redress underlying causes with legitimacy, relief and sustainability. And, from then and there, begin to reclaim a deeply receded expectation of social peace, and move on to secure shared spaces and ultimately begin a resetting of unifying group identities. None of this is without precedent.

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