

# INSIGHT REPORT:

## Mozambique: Militancy in Cabo Delgado province: Outlook, escalation matrix

MARCH 2025

### KEY JUDGEMENTS



- The province of Cabo Delgado experienced an increase in attacks by the Islamist militant group al-Sunnah in 2024. There was also an increase in the number of attacks in some of the province's MEDIUM-risk districts, including Ancuabe, Chiure and Mecufi, raising concerns about the group's potential expansion in capabilities and areas of operation.

- While most al-Sunnah's activities will continue to be concentrated in the EXTREME-risk districts of north-eastern Cabo Delgado, al-Sunnah's intention to target MEDIUM-risk locations is evident and will likely continue over the coming year. However, their capabilities will be limited by ongoing security operations.

- Similarly, the provincial capital Pemba and Palma (Palma district) will remain attractive targets for al-Sunnah, though their ability to conduct attacks in the towns will remain very limited.
- Organisations should defer all travel to the EXTREME-risk districts and adopt enhanced precautions in the rest of Cabo Delgado. Essential travel to liquefied natural gas (LNG) sites on the Afungi Peninsula (Palma) is possible with additional precautions. Regularly review crisis management and response plans, including escalation matrices and related triggers.



OVERVIEW

The security environment in Cabo Delgado province remains precarious, with a new differentiation in the risk profile across its districts. The al-Sunnah group launched an increased number of attacks throughout the province in 2024, nearly doubling since 2023. Most militancy-related violence occurred in the EXTREME-risk districts of Macomia, Meluco, Mocimboa da Praia, Muidumbe, Nangade, Palma and Quissanga (see figure 2), accounting for around 77% of incidents.

There was also a notable increase in attacks in the MEDIUM-risk districts of Ancuabe and Chiure, as well as notable attacks in Pemba and Mecufi districts. For example, on 27 January 2024, al-Sunnah attacked a local community near Pemba town, killing one person. The transnational Islamic State group (IS) claimed responsibility for the attack, which it described as religiously motivated. Three days later, al-Sunnah attacked a Mozambique Defence Armed Forces (FADM) patrol near Nahavara (Mecufi), killing eight soldiers and members of a community militia.

In 2024, there were further indications that the militancy continued to grow compared with its earlier years. Al-Sunnah used less violence against civilians, reportedly as part of a strategy to gain support. Since 2018, the proportion of civilians killed in attacks has more than halved. Nonetheless, the use of violence appears to be opportunistic and continues to pose credible risks to people in the province. Additionally, al-Sunnah retains access to more sophisticated weapons, including grenades and automatic firearms, primarily through conducting raids on the security forces, thus maintaining its lethality. The group has also continued to employ asymmetric tactics and maintain broad targeting patterns (see figure 1).

Established tactics	Common targets
Hit and run attacks (including ambushes and raids)	Local civilian populations (including for food and medicinal supplies as well as recruitment and ransoms)
Public executions	Christian religious sites
Small explosives	Vehicles travelling along main roads
Kidnappings and forced recruitment	The security forces (the number of attacks targeting the security forces has increased in recent years)
Resource targeting (including burning food supplies)	

Figure 1: Al-Sunnah tactics and targeting patterns

Despite these advances, most attacks remain small scale, involving a few lightly armed attackers targeting lightly defended locations. The impact of most attacks is therefore localised and has had little strategic impact. Regional security interventions by Rwanda and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have been a significant factor in limiting al-Sunnah's ability to advance further.



Al-Sunnah has been able to withstand FADM missions. However, it has been less able to defend itself against the better trained and equipped Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) and SADC troops. The RDF's emphasis on the protection of civilians, local community building, command of the local language and restraint in combat operations has led to a favourable perception among local communities, increasing their effectiveness against al-Sunnah. While SADC's Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) withdrew in July 2024 amid financial and other challenges, FADM and RDF are now looking at stronger cooperation in several districts, including increasing the RDF contingent of around 2,000 in Cabo Delgado.

### Effectiveness of regional interventions in Mozambique

In addition to reducing the strength of al-Sunnah, the RDF and SAMIM missions have assisted in the return of at least 610,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs). However, at least 2.3m people remain in need throughout northern Mozambique. This has been exacerbated by governance and development deficits. The goals of neutralising militancy and building capacity and cooperation with FADM have however yielded mixed results. The FADM's effectiveness has also been undermined by continued reports of violent conduct and intimidation of civilians by its forces. The deteriorating relations between FADM and community militias has also had a negative impact. Additionally, SAMIM's withdrawal has created a leadership vacuum, prompting a more aggressive stance by RDF. This has the potential to compromise commitments to civilian safety and undermine cooperation with local communities.

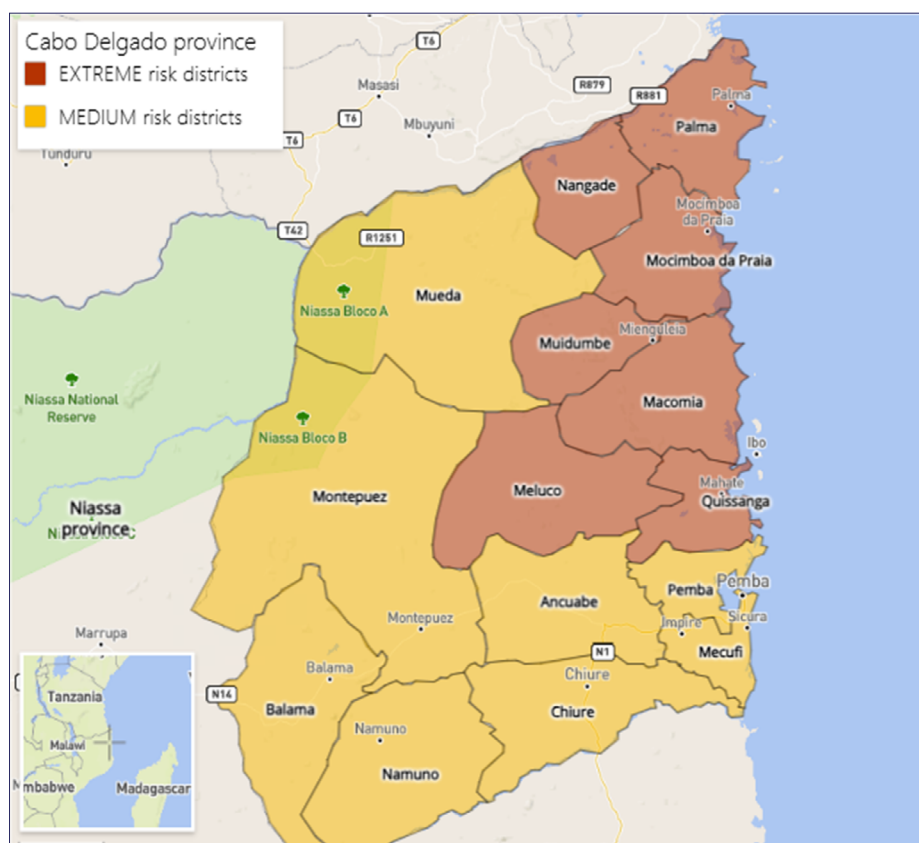


Figure 2: Cabo Delgado risk map



## OUTLOOK

Over the coming year, the militant threat posed by al-Sunnah will remain the primary security risk for organisations operating in Cabo Delgado. Al-Sunnah is expected to retain its guerrilla-style approach to fighting, relying heavily on small-scale hit-and-run attacks against less secure targets. Most militant activity will continue to occur in the EXTREME-risk districts, given al-Sunnah's established presence there. Macomia and Mocimboa da Praia will likely remain the most-affected districts. In Palma district, the potential resumption of multi-billion-dollar LNG projects in the Afungi peninsula will inspire al-Sunnah to conduct more attacks in the district for propaganda purposes. However, the heightened RDF presence in Palma town and near LNG sites will lower the risk of attacks in these areas.

Al-Sunnah is also likely to continue to expand its operations further south into MEDIUM-risk districts (see *figure 2*). The districts of Ancuabe, Chiure and Mecufi will be easier for al-Sunnah to expand into and conduct attacks in comparison to other MEDIUM-risk districts. This is because the group will be able to more easily use the N380 and N1 highways for movement to/from its current bases. Al-Sunnah is unlikely to resume its previous attempts to venture further west into Mueda and Montepuez districts due to the difficult terrain, though southern areas of Montepuez will remain vulnerable to occasional incursions. Pemba will remain an attractive target for al-Sunnah but, as with Palma, the heightened military presence in the town makes an attack unlikely.

Figure 3, a condensed escalation matrix, details the assessment of the militant threat in key locations in Cabo Delgado over the coming year, providing early warning indicators and instructions for timely intervention. These key locations are where most organisations operate and include the towns of Palma and Pemba and the districts of Ancuabe, Chiure, Mecufi and Montepuez.

Colour	Descriptor of actions required
Green	No change to security measures
Yellow	Be prepared to change in-bound travel / local movement / reduce notice to evacuate
Orange	Defer non-essential travel / minimise movement / reduce notice to evacuate
Red	Defer all travel / movement / evacuate workforce (non-essential/all)

Key to Figure 3

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Factor	Drivers	Likely Indicators	Actions	Assessment
Main towns: Pemba and Palma				
Assessment of militants' intent and capability to stage attacks	<p>High political profile of Pemba and Palma towns, and ability to use attacks to increase international visibility for propaganda purposes.</p> <p>Sustained local and foreign military presence.</p> <p>Aggressive action by the government or/and the security forces against suspected al-Sunnah sympathisers, radicalising potential recruits.</p> <p>Sustained ties and knowledge-sharing between al-Sunnah and IS, potentially increasing their capability to attack better-secured areas.</p> <p>Significant IDP population marked by difficult humanitarian conditions.</p> <p>Potential resumption of LNG activities in Palma.</p>	<p>Confirmed sightings of militants or an al-Sunnah attack within 15 miles (25km) of Pemba or Palma.</p> <p>Establishment of al-Sunnah bases in surrounding districts.</p> <p>Evidence of al-Sunnah's increased access to more advanced weapons, including airborne weapons and remotely operated devices.</p> <p>Statements of intent by al-Sunnah to attack Pemba or Palma.</p> <p>Evidence of al-Sunnah's increased maritime capabilities contrasted with a reduction in maritime security.</p> <p>Advance warning of threat from government or security officials, professional security providers or intelligence sources with access to reliable and verifiable information, or foreign embassies.</p>	<p><b>Inbound travel:</b> Defer non-essential travel in the event of an attack or increasing risk of an attack. Identify de-escalatory triggers, based on an assessment of the risk environment, determining the conditions for a resumption in travel.</p> <p><b>Internal movement:</b> Minimise non-essential movement outside secure premises. People in affected areas should prepare to shelter in place for at least seven days, with access to sufficient essential provisions, including food, water and medicines.</p> <p><b>Evacuation readiness:</b> Review evacuation plans, build and maintain accurate workforce locations and other details. Workforce should be prepared to evacuate within 24 hours.</p> <p><b>Other factors:</b> Be prepared to centralise workforce at an assembly/stand-fast location. Prepare to activate business-continuity plans.</p>	<p>Al-Sunnah has not attacked Pemba town before and the risk of an attack remains low unless the group increases its capabilities. Al-Sunnah is unlikely to be able to attempt a large-scale attack without revealing its intentions in the preceding weeks, which would increase the likelihood of such an attack being thwarted. This limits any attacks in Pemba to small-scale incidents, which would likely be short-lived given an anticipated rapid military response. Primary targets would include less-secure beach areas, Christian sites or police, military or government installations.</p> <p>Conversely, Palma town has been attacked by al-Sunnah, notably in a weeks-long siege in March 2021. While the current RDF presence in Palma makes an attack on the central parts of the town unlikely, the outskirts are more vulnerable. To date, al-Sunnah has shown no interest in the LNG sites, though this may change. It is unlikely to breach the security mechanisms at these locations unless it increases its capabilities. However, the resumption of LNG activities would likely increase the presence of the security forces and foreign nationals, which will increase al-Sunnah intention to stage attacks in Palma.</p>



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Key MEDIUM-risk districts: Ancuabe, Chiure, Mecufi, Montepuez				
Assessment of militants' intent and capability to stage attacks	<p>Withdrawal of SAMIM forces.</p> <p>Increased presence of FADM troops contrasted with relatively fewer RDF troops, alongside ongoing military offensives against al-Sunnah.</p> <p>Assessed expansionist ambitions of al-Sunnah, and relative freedom of movement across MEDIUM-risk districts.</p> <p>Al-Sunnah's ability to access weapons and explosives.</p> <p>Ongoing recruitment and ability to attract vulnerable communities impacted by difficult socio-economic conditions and underdevelopment.</p> <p>Aggressive action by the government or the security forces against suspected al-Sunnah sympathisers, radicalising potential recruits.</p> <p>Greater population density compared with northern districts, providing more targets for attacks.</p>	<p>Confirmed sightings of militants within MEDIUM-risk districts.</p> <p>Establishment of permanent bases or camps in MEDIUM-risk districts</p> <p>Statements of intent by al-Sunnah to attack MEDIUM-risk districts.</p> <p>Increased distribution of propaganda material, including criticism of the government, within MEDIUM-risk districts.</p> <p>An increase in reports of disappearances or kidnappings of civilians in MEDIUM-risk areas.</p> <p>Confirmed sightings of militants in the Mozambique Channel, surrounding littoral waters of ports or coastal towns.</p> <p>Advance warning of a threat by government or security officials, professional security providers or information sources with access to reliable and verifiable information.</p>	<p><b>Inbound travel:</b> Depending on the scale and location of the attack relative to operations, be prepared to postpone in-bound travel with little notice.</p> <p><b>Internal movement:</b> Avoid affected areas. Additional security support and precautions may be required for all road movements. Liaise with security provider.</p> <p><b>Evacuation readiness:</b> No change, though as a standard measure, workforce should remain prepared to evacuate within seven days.</p> <p><b>Other factors:</b> Account for workforce. Review physical access at residential premises and worksites.</p>	<p>Al-Sunnah's intent and capability to carry out attacks in MEDIUM-risk districts varies by location, with Ancuabe, Chiure and Mecufi being the most-likely targets. Ancuabe, which borders the EXTREME-risk zone, has historically experienced more attacks than Chiure and Mecufi. In 2022, there was a spike in al-Sunnah attacks in Ancuabe amid an intensification of military operations in EXTREME-risk districts and a subsequent reduction in military presence in Ancuabe. A strong military response contributed to a reduction in attacks in 2023. Al-Sunnah has continued to conduct intermittent attacks. However, the deployment of the RDF to Ancuabe will continue to limit al-Sunnah's ability to conduct regular and large-scale attacks in the district.</p> <p>Similar conditions contributed to an increase in al-Sunnah attacks in Chiure in 2022. The district also experienced a decline in militant activity in 2023. However, the district experienced its highest levels of militant activity in 2024 as militants came under pressure elsewhere in the province. Most of the attacks were small scale and targeted Christian sites. Chiure remains an attractive target for militants due to water resources on the Lurio river.</p> <p>Conversely, attacks in Mecufi were rare, but resumed in 2024 following a lull since 2022. However, operating in Mecufi remains challenging for al-Sunnah given the increased vigilance of the security forces in the neighbouring Pemba district. Similarly, there were no recorded al-Sunnah attacks in Montepuez in 2024 amid increased security measures. However, militant movements were recorded in Montepuez. While this may not necessarily indicate an overt intention to attack, civilians encountering militants will face credible risks.</p> <p>Despite al-Sunnah's proven capabilities to operate in Ancuabe, Chiure and Mecufi, it will remain challenging for the group to establish a permanent presence and carry out frequent attacks in these districts. This is due to increased security alertness and the distance of these districts from al-Sunnah's main camps and typical areas of operation. While the presence of less-secure local communities and FADM troops in these locations will continue to present attractive targets for attack, increased cooperation in joint operations between RDF and FADM will make this strategy harder to execute.</p>



## RECOMMENDATIONS TO MANAGERS

- We continue to advise against all inbound travel to the EXTREME security-risk districts of Cabo Delgado, Macomia, Meluco, Mocimboa da Praia, Muidumbe, Nangade, Palma and Quissanga, due to the prevailing insecurity and unavailability of reliable road and sea transport options. Evacuate non-essential workforce from the same districts. Essential travel to the LNG sites should be undertaken in close coordination with the on-site security team. Follow all specific recommendations given by on-site contacts. Monitor militancy trends in Cabo Delgado, including using escalation matrices. Adjustments to posture should be made if changes in the security environment are observed. Regularly review and update escalation matrices.
- Organisations should have the ability to evacuate rapidly from EXTREME-risk districts in the event of a sudden deterioration in the security environment. This is due to the limited ability of the authorities and security providers to conduct evacuations in these areas. Ensure that plans are rapidly implementable for your foreign and domestic workforce and address arrangements for domestic employees with different profiles, including those who are eligible for relocation. Ensure that robust shelter-in-place arrangements are in place if relocation from the area is not possible, including adequate supplies (drinking water, food stocks, medical supplies and fuel reserves), communications equipment and accommodation.
- Travel to the rest of Cabo Delgado can continue, but with enhanced precautions. Overland travel should be for essential purposes only and organisations should use air travel where possible. When undertaking travel, workforce should obtain a pre-travel threat assessment and abide by strict journey-management protocols with the support of a local security provider. Security providers should have access to local knowledge, a 24/7 operations room and tracking and emergency assistance capabilities. When travelling in rural areas, exercise caution and maintain heightened vigilance. Managers should confirm the ability and comfort levels of workforce in rural areas to remain for extended periods with limited or no support in the event of a security incident or logistics disruption.
- Ensure that all in-country workforce is well informed about your organisation's business-continuity and incident-management protocols. Individuals should understand the types of support your organisation can provide and be briefed on their role when responding to critical incidents and crises. Communicate verified information and a response plan to in-country workforce in a timely manner, to mitigate the risk from misinformation. Ensure workforce has access to reliable back-up communication methods in the event of disruption to telecommunications services. While telecommunications services are broadly stable, service reliability reduces in remote areas. Stay abreast of developments throughout Cabo Delgado using verified sources, including International SOS alerts, diplomatic missions and local contacts.
- This advice is not exhaustive; review our online security content for more information. For follow-up questions about the assessments or recommendations in this report, please call your dedicated line and ask to speak to the Regional Security Centre. Contact our Consulting and Solutions team for more information on our escalation matrices.



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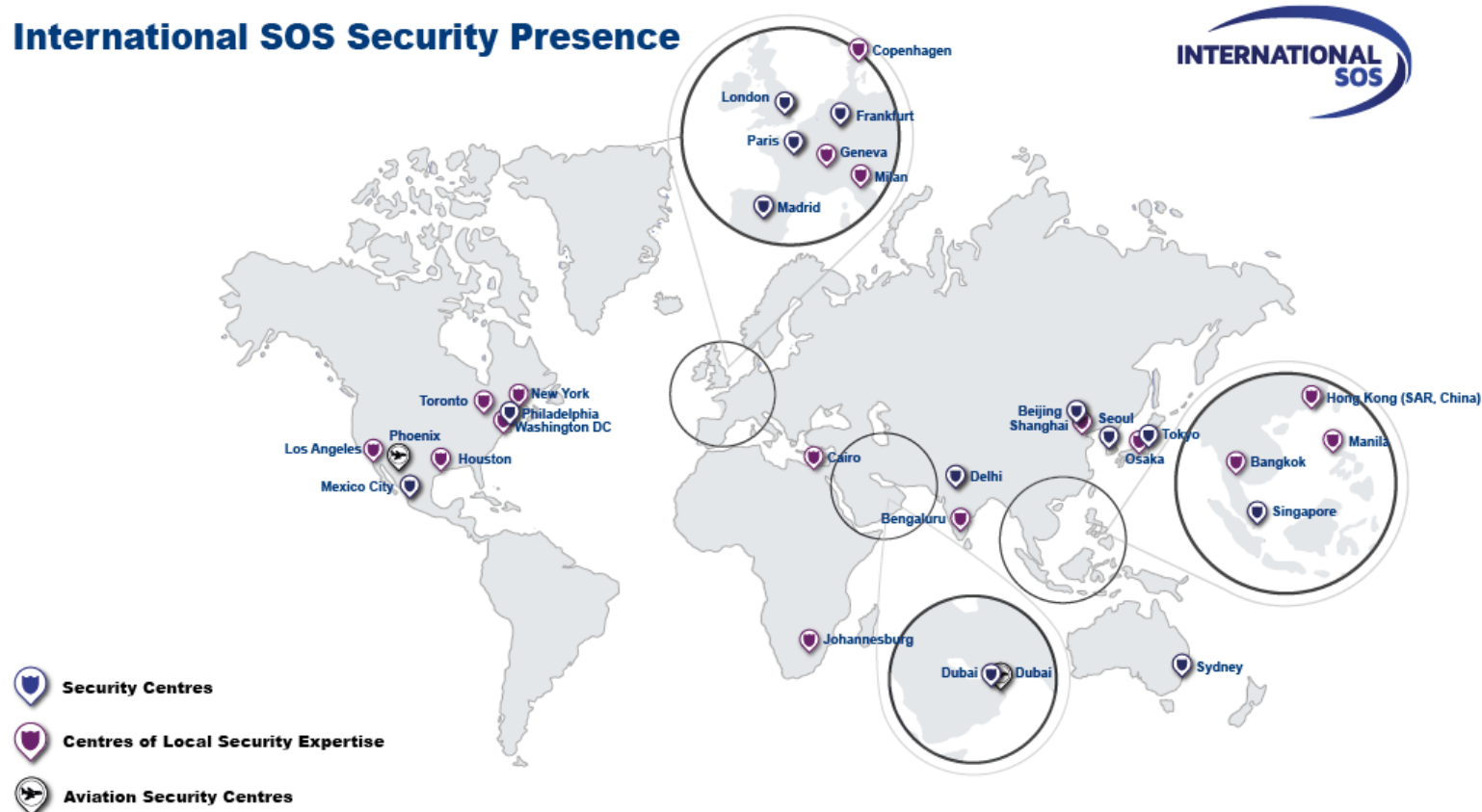
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