

Security within Insecurity? Unpacking the Complexities of Salafi–Jihādi Extremism, Jihādi Provision and Governance in Southern Africa: Insights from Cabo Delgado¹

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Abstract:

Africa's ungoverned margins are steadily becoming laboratories of rudimentary–proto governance for Salafi–Jihādi groups: from Nigeria's Boko Haram, Somalia's al-Shabaab to Mozambique's Ansar al-Sunna. Although most Salafi–Jihādi groups in the continent have engaged in activities of radicalisation and sporadic terrorism, various nonstate actors are signifying a burgeoning desire for territoriality, jihādi provision and governance. Using Northern Mozambique as a space for epistemological and empirical analysis, this article interrogates the complexities of Salafi–Jihādi extremism in Southern Africa. The analysis situates the trajectories of Africa's most recent Salafi–Jihādi group, Ansar al-Sunna at the fore. Through the conceptual lenses of rebel governance, the paper reveals how colonial legacies, societal exclusions and dispossession create desires for alterity: Salafi–Jihādi led rebelocracy. The paper argues that Salafi–jihādi groups are solidly becoming entities of enormous complexity where sectarianism feeds violent extremism, drives power grabs and rebelocracy. Salafi–Jihādi groups are strategically instrumentalising the “win–hearts and minds” (WHM) modus operandi to acquire ounces of territoriality and control across conflict–ridden localities. The perspective put forward in this article thus is aimed to enrich the current discourse on the nexus between Salafi–Jihādi groups, ungoverned spaces and rebelocracy in Southern Africa.

Keywords:

Ansar al-Sunna;
Northern Mozambique;
Rebelocracy; Jihādi
Governance; Security
within Insecurity.

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Introduction

Perhaps the intricate (in)security dynamics in Mozambique can be best articulated through the maxim that reads: “Africa—the continent of paradoxes and extremes” (Tar, 2021). Or simply, the spread of Salafi–Jihādism in Southern Africa. Cabo Delgado, the northernmost province of Mozambique (see Figure 1 below), has attracted both epistemic and empirical attention for more than a decade for at least two juxtaposing reasons: resource opulence and extremism. First, Mozambique uncovered one of the major deposits of rubies and considerable liquefied natural gas (LNG) reserves in the Montepuez and Rovuma basin during 2009 and 2012, respectively. The discovery of LNG offered a new avenue for development in Mozambique. These discoveries strategically placed Maputo on the global charts of the natural gas industry. Such dynamics resulted in the increased importance of Mozambique's northern coastal province of Cabo Delgado, thereby, attracting some of the world's largest energy companies to invest in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province (Augé, 2020).



Figure 1: Map of Mozambique

Consequently, Maputo experienced significant influxes of foreign direct investments (FDIs) that promised socioeconomic development for ordinary citizens, especially the youth. Such trends ignited hopes for economic prosperity and sustainable development in the Mozambican government and broader society—reversing years of colonial imbalances and postcolonial intraregional inequalities, poverty and strengthening post–conflict reconstruction. At first sight, Cabo Delgado and by extension, Mozambique

seemed fated for a prosperous future with resource discoveries imagined to economically benefit its people, the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO) government and the broader gas sector, globally.

Second, however and counterfactually, Cabo Delgado has been plunged into a complex (in)security crisis that draws from *Islāmic* fundamentalism and extremism since 2015. Inasmuch as Mozambique has been viewed as a ‘post–conflict success story’ for more than 30 years following the general peace accord, the country has always been a vortex of struggle, imbalances and conflict since the 1960s (1964–1974) (1975–1992) and recently (2017–present). The 5th October 2017 marked a new phase of political violence in Northern Mozambique characterised by the proliferation of violent extremism spearheaded by a *Salafi–Jihādi* group, Ansar al-Sunna, colloquially known as *al-Shabaabs* (not to be confused with al-Shabaabs located in Somalia) or *Mashababos* (vernacular). This phase caught Southern Africa, the continent as well as the international community by surprise. Although Ansar al-Sunna has been operating as a sect since the early 2010s, the *Salafi–Jihādi* group gained notoriety after the Mocímboa da Praia assault that claimed several lives. Subsequent to the initial attacks of October the 5th, Ansar al-Sunna has been amplifying its strength, (in)security, and influence. By 2020, merely three years following its emergence as a violent entity, the *jihādi* group executed a minimum of 20 to maximum of 40 sporadic and gruesome attacks per month, targeting public infrastructure, secular officials and ordinary citizens (see Figure 2 below).

Year		Attacks Per Month	Region(s) of Dominance
2009 2017	–	0–5 violent attacks	Mocímboa da Praia District and Palma District Localities: Mitumbate, Maculo and others
2017 2018	–	7–15 violent attacks	Palma District and Mavango District Localities: Olumbi, Chitolo, Monjane and others
2018 2019	–	9–25 violent attacks	Macomia District; Nengade District; Mecúfi District Localities: DiacaVelha, Nathuko, Paqueue and others
2019 2020	–	30–45 violent attacks	Muidumbe District, Mocímboa da Praia District Localities: Xitaxi, Quissanga, Muatide and others

Figure 2: Ansar al-Sunna’s Political Economy of Violence, 2017–2020.

Eight years on, Ansar al-Sunna has spearheaded more than 2 370 events linked to political violence across localities in Cabo Delgado (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, 2026). While other African governments have been occupied with the recent Ebola outbreak, Maputo is battling with Ansar al-Sunna’s uninterrupted *Salafi–Jihādi* movement. Reports from the United Nations Refugee Agency (2024) show that as of January 2024, over 4 000 people have been killed and 800 000 displaced due to Ansar

al-Sunna's violent extremism. So far, the escalating (in)security in Cabo Delgado disrupted gas projects and developments, delaying potential investments, economic progress and sustainable development. By and large, the synergies between resource discoveries and violent extremism in Cabo Delgado avouch for the dominant scholarly view that Mozambique has fallen into the same trap as with many resource endowed African countries (Pereira, Forquilha & Habibe, 2018; Feijó & Orre, 2024; Bonate, 2024). Policymakers are also in agreement with this vantage point. Liesl Louw-Vaudran, a senior advisor at the African Union, asserted that (BBC News Africa, 2021): *"it's almost uncanny...the time of it...that here we have one of the biggest natural gas finds and then you suddenly have an insurgency. It is exceedingly difficult to not see a link there"*. The timely coincidence of resource discoveries and prospects for economic development with incidences of violent extremism in Cabo Delgado province, sparked the resource–curse debate. It systematically reinforces the burgeoning idea that Cabo Delgado is encountering and living out the realities of “paradoxes and extremes.” Nevertheless, these binaries related to the paradox of the plenty woefully downplay the complex nature of the insecurity crisis in Cabo Delgado (Noor, 2021). Such binaries should not be perceived as the root causes of the ongoing conflict dynamics in Northern Mozambique, but rather as consequences, if not manifestations of frantic-complex-fluid factors at play. All this prompts us to critically ask the following three questions that will guide the execution of this paper:

- Does the Northern Mozambique experience demonstrate the realities of “paradoxes and extremes” within a resource-rich but institutionally fragile country?
- How can we explain the evolving complex dynamics of Salafi–Jihādi extremism to *Salafi–Jihādi* governance in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado region?
- In what ways does societal perceptions of security within (in)security contribute to *Salafi–Jihādi* extremism, *jihādi* governance and counterextremism initiatives?

Researching Africa as a field of violent extremism and terrorism demands methodological tools that have the capacity to unearth the sociology of complex political violence. The research employed a qualitative approach, with the application of process-tracing and critical analytical methods, to investigate the complexities of *Salafi–Jihādi* extremism in Mozambique. Data was drawn from a careful (re)reading of secondary literature to uncover missed causal variables, hidden assumptions, and deconstruct existing information to gain insight on underlying structures and shifting conflict dynamics. The study took a pragmatic approach to select secondary materials based on the following merits: first, Mozambique's history, particularly, the emergence of *Islām* and the pre-and-post Portuguese era; second, the post-independence Mozambican status quo; third, the resource-curse discourse; and lastly, transnationality in Southern Africa. The analysis of the selected secondary literature elucidated both limitations and nuances. Reflecting broadly on the limitations that the study faced in its execution, two issues stood out. First, the limited capacity to analyse literature written in Portuguese restricted the research's potential and ability to bring forth critical issues

raised by northerners. Second, the over-reliance on secondary materials has, inadvertently, steered the research to rehearse some elements of the Anglo-Saxon knowledge. To address these limitations, the author relied on the following scholarly materials (a) local authorities on the subject matter (João Pereira, Salvador Forquilha, Sheikh Saide Habibe, Liazzat Bonate, Tassiana Tomé, to name a few); (b) prominent *Islāmic* clerics (for example, Sheikh Saide Habibe); (c) two dominant databases on political and/or organised violence (the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)). The selected data demonstrated an agreement on Mozambique's colonial continuities, resource abundance or curse, and politics of relative deprivation. However, disconnections around *jihādi* provision and rebelocracy materialised. These *disconnectivities* justifies research that unpack how relative deprivation, transnationality, sectarianism, and rebelocracy intersect. The interest is placed on such nuances.

This review develops its arguments in three sections. The first section relates to the introductory section, as outlined in the preliminary paragraphs. Written with historians, peace and security scholars in mind, the study provides a historical overview of the complexities in Mozambique. The second section is designed to unpack the dynamics of *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism in Southern Africa. It does so by looking at the evolution of Ansar al-Sunna's *jihādi*: from terror to care. The last section interrogates counterextremist initiatives for Mozambique's peace and security. Taken all together, the present paper pays specific attention to the particularities of conflict complexities by evaluating Ansar al-Sunna, and how the *Salafi-Jihādi* group is actively making the familiar narrative of violent extremism, strange (Baaz & Stern, 2016). Before the debate advances any further, it is important that the paper sets out the conceptual and theoretical lens that guides the epistemic inquiry.

Of Rebelocracy? Theorising Salafi-Jihādi Governance

Africa's 21st century (in)security dynamics are rapidly transforming discourses around the political economy of violence: with destruction, diversion and (dis)order as defining features. Violent extremism is becoming a culmination of sectarianism, often militarised to drive terror and *de facto* governance. In fact, Ansar al-Sunna's *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism in Mozambique paints a grim picture of how violence emerges from sectarian extremes that brew into sporadic episodes of terrorism and spark an appetite for rebel governance in localities. While discourses on Mozambique's armed conflict frame the ongoing dynamics as manifestations of terrorism, insurrection or *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism (as with the current paper), a few scholarly works interrogate how the ongoing complex conflict dynamics in Northern Mozambique are shifting from *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism to *Salafi-Jihādi* governance that likens rebel governance.

What describes order during (dis)order? What informs such order? Who spearheads the order? These questions have become the seed that informs scholarship around rebel governance with scholars seeking to understand the phenomenon, dimensions, conditions, as well as typologies. Before the discussion moves forward, let us first

explore the phraseology of rebel governance. Though definitions vary, scholars generally agree that rebel governance describes rebels' efforts, particularly, extremists or *Salafi-Jihādi* groups, to create order during wartime. In this vein, the phraseology defines a complex phenomenon wherein violent non-state actors such as rebels, insurgents or *Salafi-Jihādi* groups occupy ungoverned spaces, establish norms, societal standards, as well as build rudimentary proto-communities during complex political violence. Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly (2015) corroborate this view, arguing that rebel governance, describes strategic actions taken by insurgents or rebels to set up alternative structures within their localities to regulate socio-economic and political spaces during armed conflict.

Rebelocracy, as a fast emerging body of literature, recognises violent nonstate actors beyond the narrative that assumes extremists are sources of insecurity, but as viable alternative governing actors that are capable to set rules and facilitate social cohesion, deliver basic services, build wartime institutions in the face of insecurity and establish societal order in (dis)order (Arjona *et. al.*, 2015; Arjona, 2016; Huang, 2016; Florea, 2020). This means that the phenomenon of rebel governance, occurs when rebels have the incentives to create systems of governance, especially during conflict. Taking a closer look into rebel governance, scholars argue that violent nonstate actors interact with several actors, particularly, the state, businesses and civilians to establish *wartime order* (Arjona, 2016), *wartime political order* (Staniland, 2012) as well as *wartime economic order* (Mampilly & Gutierrez, 2023).

To further outline the basic ideas on rebel political order, three scope conditions should be evident: (1) the threat to use armed force, (2) some degree of territorial control for rebels, and (3) rebel-civilian relations (Kasfir, 2015). Rebel governance paradigm thus focuses on the systematic relations between rebel rulers and the ruled civilians within a rebel-held locality during armed conflict (Pfeifer & Schwab, 2023). Rebel-citizen relations across rebel-held communities are conceptualised and categorised as *rebelocracy* (predominantly coercive), *aliocracy* (limited deference), and *civilocracy* (occasionally in consultation), often resembling nation-states (Arjona, 2016; Bamber & Svensson, 2022). These phraseologies indicate that citizens are the most important stakeholders in rebel-held territories as they define the classification of the rebel-regime type (Arjona, 2017; Liu, 2022). Be as it may, the framework of political unpredictability is instrumentalised in gauging the political certainty, stability and peace of rebel governed territories (Tapscott & Urwin, 2025). Within spaces where rebels have sporadic presence, stability and peace tends to be limited (high unpredictability). While short time horizons of control show aspects of stability (mid-range unpredictability), trajectories where rebels facilitate political transition, stability becomes certain (low unpredictability).

Jihādists, around Africa and elsewhere, are rapidly becoming agents of wartime social order. This builds on and extends rebel governance scholarship with *Salafi-Jihādi* ideology at the fore. This body of work interrogates how ideology shapes rebels' governance, inform social rules, drive practices around enforcement, justice, socio-

political and economic governance as well as the provision of basic services (Raineri, Nagarajan, Albert, Ndiaye & Stoddard, 2025). It is important to note that *jihādi* governance is strategically positioned between the scholarship of rebels and jihādists that rule, set norms, and control territory ungoverned margins. *Jihādi* governance, as such, is an intersectional manifestation of rebel rulers, *jihādists*, governance, and political *Islāmism* (Drevon & Haenni, 2026). Religiously motivated groups are conquering territories where state presence is limited, set rules, and establish parallel forms of social order and governance, often aligning their cause to the enactment of a *jihādi*-proto state (Svensson & Finnbogason, 2020; Lyammouri, 2021; Ahmed, 2024). This typology, as Lia (2015) puts it, constructs a *jihādi*-proto state that is extremely ideological, internationalist, territorially expansive, and irridentist.

Jihādi governance therefore describes the construction of statelike entity that is centred around *al-Salafiyya al-Jihādiyya* ideologies, often with the grand objective of imposing societal order, establish rules and justice system, provide basic services and economy within conflict-ridden territories where state presence is limited. Ahmed (2024) rightly points out that *jihādi* groups exercise ‘rebel governance’ through the process of seizing ungoverned territories, especially within conflict-affected communities with the vision to espouse an extreme politico-religious vision and authority. Parts of the Middle East, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa are already theatres of violent extremist and *jihādi* governance. *Jihādīs*, particularly, al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and affiliates such as al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, Ansar al-Sunna, Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), amongst others, are rolling out pockets of *jihādi* governance across the Horn of Africa, the Sahel region, East and West Africa, as well as Southern Africa (Skjelderup, 2020; Raineri, 2020; Rupesinghe, Naghizadeh & Cohen, 2021; Carboni, Nsaibia, Ismail, Serwat & Bofin, 2026).

Similarly to Arjona’s observations that rebel-ruled communities tend to be surprisingly orderly (Arjona, 2016), *jihādīs* insert themselves in spaces of instability during wartime to craft social order through ultra-aggressive behaviour, service provision propaganda, and civilian obedience. These complex *Salafi-Jihādi* dynamics, as this review points out, manifest in a bottom-up manner: from sectarianism, extremism to rebelocracy (Figure 3 drawn by author).

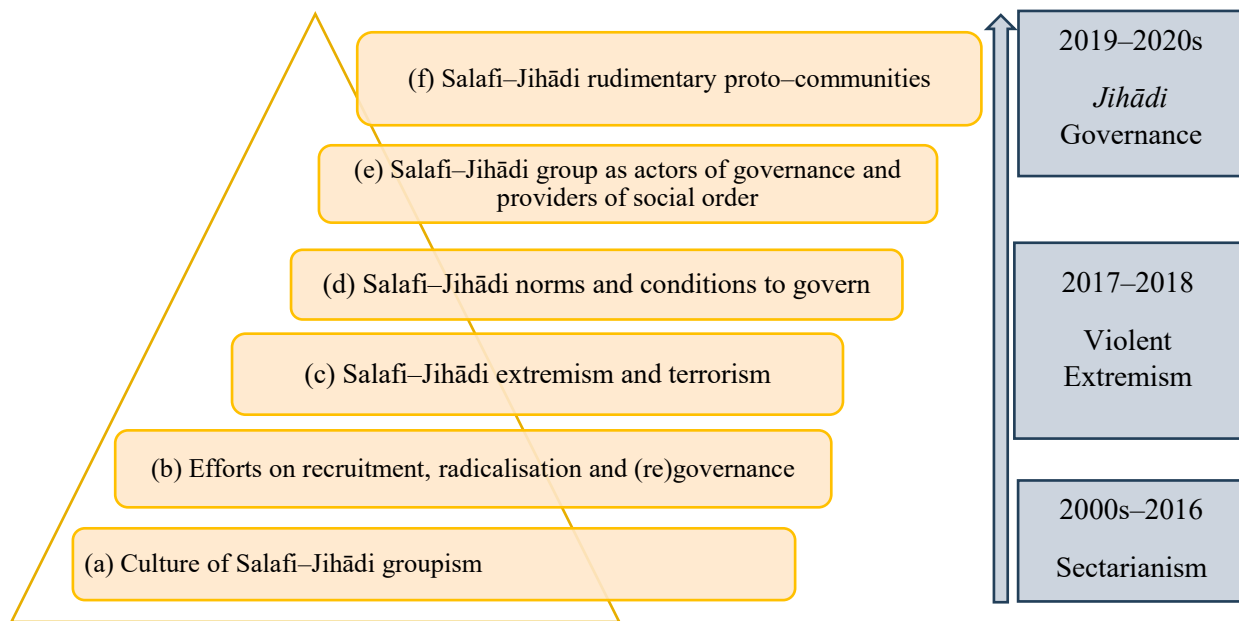


Figure 3: Ansar al-Sunna's Trajectories—From Sectarianism, Extremism to Jihādi Governance.

The diagram above provides a summation of Ansar al-Sunna's evolution: from terror to rule. It is important to take note that evolution dynamics of *Salafi-Jihādi* are significantly complex. Such complex dynamics as Lia (2015) puts it, are intensely ideological, internationalist, territorially expansive and irredentist. Taking a closer look at these complex dynamics, I argue that *Jihādīs* with an appetite to rollout *jihādi* governance start their trajectories with groupism. Ansar al-Sunna, for example, started in Mocímboa da Praia as a sectarian group that connected young *Islāmic* scholars, radical clerics, and supported by petty traders and fisherman who lacked formal education and employment opportunities, a sectarian movement overlooked by the central government (Bukarti & Munasinghe, 2020). I further argue that politics of neglect justifies two interrelated political behaviours: first, the need for sectarian shift towards the reality of radicalisation; and second, the use of military force (*Jihād al-bil-sayf*) as a necessity. Because sectarian groups realise that their *Islāmic* sectarian teachings are not adhered to, *jihādīs* unleash ultra-aggressive behaviour as the next justifiable cause of action (Zicina, 2024). Ansar al-Sunna, for example, tapped into an ultra-aggressive behaviour between 2017–2019, transforming the sect into a sinister *jihādi* group synonymous with insecurity (Bukarti & Munasinghe, 2020; Heyen-Dubé & Rands, 2022). The extremist trajectories, as the figure 1 suggests, alongside massive citizen obedience and limited state response to insecurities, creates an appetite for control and territoriality. Thus, insecurities faced by localities, as will be elaborated further, provide *jihādīs* with relative impunity to operate, undermine the central government and rollout a *Salafi-Jihādi* rebelocracy. *Jihādīs* occupy themselves with welfare provision stratagem to gain supporters, followers, and local legitimacy. Additionally, *Jihādīs* engage within politics of irredentism, while simultaneously ensuring that local legitimacy materialises into *jihādi* governance that corresponds to *Salafi-Jihādi*.

Qureshi (1981) rightly argue that extremists manipulate *Islāmic* ideologies due to pro-military nature, although its tenets are not literal in meaning. Ansar al-Sunna followed suit. The *jihādi* group has not only militarising the Wahhabi doctrine, radical interpretations of Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) and fundamental dogmas of *Salafi-Jihādi* from *tawhīd* [*Allāh*–the Creator, Provider and Lawgiver]; *ḥākimiyya* [divine governance, i.e., politico-religious authority]; *Manhaj* [systematic method of performing deeds, i.e., strategy of terror/of hearts and minds]; *Jihād bil yad* [fighting against evil with action] to *Juhd* [efforts aimed at preventing harm and bringing benefits, i.e., government-in-waiting] but justifies the extremist cause across Cabo Delgado province as a necessary *al-da'awa* [missionary work] (Zicina, 2024, see also Bonney, 2004; Wiktorowicz, 2006; Wagemakers, 2016, 2020; Hafez, 2020; Bonate, 2024).

These characteristics demonstrate that *Salafi-Jihādi* groups operate within politics of glocality. Glocality, as a concept, refers to the interplay between local and global actors and factors (Anand & Pai, 2023). Extremists have globally shared norms and attitudes, but act locally. African *jihādism*, as Raineri *et.al.* (2025) put it, links localism with globalism and governance. Taking a closer look at Mozambique's transnational *jihādism*, Bonate (2024) rightly points out, that Ansar al-Sunna is engaging within a glocal form of resistance that marries local actors to the global *jihād* agenda that rebels against Western [c]hristian hegemonic order. In his work, Sebastian Elischer, argue that local factors such as state institutions play an important role as “(de)mobiliser and mobiliser” of *Salafi-Jihādi* in Africa (Elischer, 2021), while transnationality and global *jihādism* sustains local actors (Svensson & Nilsson, 2022). This nexus, often observable through local extremists seeking allegiance to *jihādi* groups such as the Islamic State or al-Qaeda, shape the trajectories of *jihādi* groups across the African continent. Glocality, as it appears, is becoming the currency of terrorism and violent extremism where nonstate actors operate locally, oftentimes through *jihādi* governance, but are nourished through a transnational global *jihādi* movement. Parts of the African continent such as the Horn of Africa, the Lake Chad Basin, and the Sahel are already laboratories of *jihādi* glocality (Brigaglia & Iocchi, 2020; Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba, 2022). As a burgeoning phenomenology that marries local issues with global agendas, glocality is becoming a reality in Southern Africa.

Local extremists continue to instrumentalise transnationality with the aim to (a) finance the *Salafi-Jihādi* extremist movement in Cabo Delgado; (b) increase the organisational and military strength and (c) justify *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism, terror and governance through *Qur'ānic* texts. Questioning how has the ideology *al-Salafiyya al-Jihādiyya* influence *jihādis* norms, values systems, resource–distribution policies and *jihādi* provision is an imperative inquiry. As Hegghmmer (2009) notes, however, it is important for researchers to assess beyond ideological doctrines, and analyse strategic goals, operations and behavioural patterns. The following subsections therefore pay particular attention to such intersectionality: questioning how *jihādis* sets norms,

governs and impose societal *glocal* orders in Northern Mozambique where the central government ghosts, neglects and excludes.

Mozambique's Forgotten Cape: A Site for Sectarianism, Extremism or Jihādism?

Beyond politics of (re)construction, peace and post-conflict success story for modern African democracies, Mozambique is facing myriad challenges that have brewed violent extremism. Ansar al-Sunna's movement in Mozambique's northern province should be understood as one operating on frantic complexities. Cabo Delgado has, and continues to, be a theatre of (in)security where Ansar al-Sunna schemes and operates, both as an architect of instability and as an entity of security in the parameters of Cabo Delgado. Questions should be asked about the conditions and catalysts that resulted into the synergies between extremist groups, territoriality and rebel governance and *jihādi* governance across Africa.

This review builds on and expands on the literature that has been set by scholars such as Pirio, Pittelli and Adam (2018); Habibe, Forquilha and Pereira (2019), Armand, Coutts, Vicente and Vilela (2020), Morier-Genoud (2020), Estelle and Darden (2021), Hanlon (2022), Bonate (2024), Guhad (2025), among others, that provide explanatory frameworks which account to the conditions that transformed Cabo Delgado into the most recent *jihādi* extremism site. Three major themes have emerged from this body of literature: first, socioeconomic marginalisation. Second, *jihādism* and radicalism. Third, recruitment, extremism and terrorism. This paper situates its contribution within the broader rebel governance scholarship, particularly, *jihādi* governance, as it is materialising across Southern Africa. This framework allows the debate to shift from treating *jihādis* as merely violence producing entities, but as nonstate actors that challenge central government, undermine State legitimacy and strive for local legitimacy where citizen-care through coercion is placed at the fore. It is important to note that applying this framework restructures the question of what conditions produced Ansar al-Sunna's *jihādi* movement? To what does the *jihādi* group do with the conditions and the ungoverned citizens it encounters? It is noteworthy, however, to understand the systematic patterns that have justified such a political behaviour and the dynamics of social movement in Cabo Delgado.

Thus, the review begins with historiographies. Mozambique's present realities, as with other postcolonial states, reflects colonial legacies and postcolonial continuities (Zicina, 2024). Portugal's colonial presence which can be traced back to the 15th century, however, its efforts for official occupation that spanned between 1895–1913, established an inherently weak administration across occupied territories, now known as Mozambique (Bonate, 2024). These territories were outrightly divided with the object that these trajectories would benefit the colonial State, economically, while governed by *Islāmic* leaders (northern regions), *prazeiros* (central regions), and Western traders (southern region). Thus, the Mozambican society developed through economic-driven

binaries, separated by the Zambezi River until the 1930s (Noor, 2021). While the Southern parts of the country received developmental initiatives, the central and northern regions were often excluded and neglected from major developments. These realities sparked aggression, dissatisfaction and resentment towards the colonial State.

Thus, revolutionary movements broke out with actors, particularly those in Northern Mozambique, seeking independence between the late 1950s to the 1960s. These actions saw the country gaining independence in 1975. Inasmuch as northerners took up arms to pave way for the first Marxist–Leninist government in Southern Africa (Ntaka, 2023), citizens in Northern Mozambique have been the most neglected and excluded by the postcolonial State. One participant argued that *“we are not heard, no one listens to us...we can arrange audience with the supreme, but we do not receive any feedback or whatsoever”* (Lucey & Patel, 2021). These dynamics point to one inference, the FRELIMO government has, wittingly or unwittingly, facilitated postcolonial continuities across its margins that continue to have a profound impact on Mozambique’s society (Rangarirai, Marnani & Rahmat, 2022). A recent observational study, for example, points out that Northern Mozambique’s is among the least developed, most illiterate (67%), healthcare access is at its lowest level (56%), poverty at its highest level (60%), as opposed to the most developed Southern region with the least illiterate levels (13%), healthcare access at its highest (77%), poverty at its lowest (30%) (Zicina, 2024). Regional inequalities traced back to colonial legacies and continuities, together with the exclusionary experiences in relation to unequal distribution of resource wealth, provided extremists entry points for recruitment and avenues for radicalisation [sectarianism], grounds for Sayyid Qutb’s followers to deem the current FRELIMO state illegitimate, encourage actors to engage in *takfirism* [charge of Muslims as unbelievers] and *Jihād* [violent extremism since 2017] to ensure that the movement establishes an Islamic State [*jihādi* governance] where *jihādis* provide security within spaces of (in)security.

Building on the historiographies and socioeconomic conditions that *jihādis* exploit to recruit, radicalise and terrorise, the following review examines conditions that provide *jihādis* with the opportunity to rollout *Salafi–Jihādi* extremism, *jihādi* governance, and politics of glocality.

Politics of Salafi–Jihādi Extremism, Jihādi Governance and Glocality

Fundamentally, areas of limited statehood in Cabo Delgado province creates opportunities for Ansar al-Sunna to challenge the state quo and undermine state legitimacy in numerous ways. First, the *jihādi* group emerged as a sect that was strongly opposed to secularism. Such a worldview propelled Ansar al-Sunna to follow an isolationist approach that advocates for its adherents to detach themselves from the “evil” outside world. This approach has been instrumentalised to achieve three extremes: (i) systematically challenge the legitimacy of the central government in Cabo Delgado; (ii) defy the universality of Western norms and Christian values, undermine post–conflict narratives and compromise the economic development calculus as well as

(iii) setting up new social, political and economic structures that are accordance to traditional *Islām*. Put differently, Ansar al-Sunna harnessed an isolationist approach across Cabo Delgado with the aim that the *Salafi–Jihādi* movement not only renounce secularism and societal universality but sets a scene for a *jihādi* governance that aligns with religious—political authority.

This means that the *jihādi* group's main concerns are far complicated than the straightforward dominant socioeconomic narrative—but are awash with complexities. To ensure that the objective of renouncing secularism and universal norms, enforcing a stricter version of *Shari'ah* law across the region and set up a new socio-political order translates into reality, the *jihādi* group employed societal deviance as a strategy. Contradictory to conventional beliefs about morality, Ansar al-Sunna's *jihādi* likens Émile Durkheim's understanding of social deviance. The *jihādi* group has, and continues to, use media platforms to justify extreme beliefs and political behaviours that diverge from societal norms, oftentimes, disrupting existing status quo. Ansar al-Sunna is advocating for social behaviours that break mainstream Muslim societal rules and replaces these rules with radical subculture (Chang, Turan & Chow, 2014). In Cabo Delgado, for example, the *jihādi* group has defied local *imams*, defaced mosques, encouraged the deregistration of children from secular public schools, discouraged northerners from public hospitals, while setting up madrassas. The *jihādi* group uses social deviance so to establish a governing system of politico-religious authority, that is, *jihādi* governance.

Second, and vehemently opposed to the secular state in Maputo, Ansar al-Sunna has constantly denounced the legitimacy of the central government in southern-Maputo. One of the main reasons the *jihādi* group used a rejectionist approach was and still is the notion that—for a new social and political order to materialise—it was deemed noble to detach from the “evil and corrupt” secular government in Mozambique. This brings us to the quandary of separatism. Indeed, from the early stages of the movement, Ansar al-Sunna centred its *jihādi* on efforts aimed at separating from the secular state. It did so by renouncing the symbolism of secularism. Picking from this point, Ansar al-Sunna dismissed the applicability of the existing secular Mozambican flag in Cabo Delgado—at least to its adherents and apologists. As such, the *jihādi* group established a new black and white *Islāmic* flag, representing loyal northerners. It is without a doubt, therefore, that Southern Africa is confronted by a *jihādi* group that presents with irredentist characteristics, operating in alignment with religious ideologies, particularly, *Salafi–Jihādi*, where transnationality and glocality sustains and multiplies.

Third, as means to undermine the legitimacy of the central government, Ansar al-Sunna has since its militancy, conducted sporadic attacks against the central State. Mutasa and Muchemwa (2021) remind us that the *jihādi* group strategically destroyed government institutions, including administrative and post offices, police stations and public hospitals. Taking notes from these conflict dynamics, it is clear that Ansar al-Sunna's gruesome military efforts towards the State is aimed at crippling the already

limited state presence in Cabo Delgado, especially the State's capacity to carry out political and administrative decisions or exercise the monopoly on the use of military force. In Mocímboa da Praia, for example, headquarters of Police of the Republic Mozambique and border guard company became objects of the *jihādi* group's initial extremist attacks of October, the 5th, 2017 (Bussotti & Coimbra, 2023). Two years later, the *jihādi* group destroyed government administrative buildings, police barracks and lowered national flags, terrorising tourists and multilateral cooperations with the aim to challenge state capacity, legitimacy, political economy as well as seize control in two different occasions: capture of Mocímboa da Praia in 2020 and Palma in 2021 (Van Rentergem, 2022). This implies that areas of poor governance in Cabo Delgado province together with Ansar al-Sunna's military strategies resulted into the central government's inability to maintain control on its territories, thereby, creating room for the *jihādi* group to expand its extremist movement and legitimise its *jihādi* governance.

Although issues of socioeconomic challenges and governmental ineffectiveness have been understood as causes and drivers of insecurity in Mozambique's 'post-conflict' status quo (Ntaka, 2023), we need to appreciate the fact that Ansar al-Sunna's *jihādi* movement is perpetuated by glocality. As with other violent extremist groups in Africa, Ansar al-Sunna has orchestrated armed conflict by marrying local issues with global ideologies to feed into a transnational *Salafi-Jihādi* agenda. Taken all together, these complexities underscore how the *jihādi* group challenges the status quo, undermines secular state's legitimacy, enforce *Islamic* law, strive for territoriality and transnational *Salafi-Jihādi* agenda.

Conspicuously, yet not considered, Ansar al-Sunna's extremist movement in Cabo Delgado has two faces: the first face delineates the *jihādi* group as a faceless evildoer who has been the chief architect of insecurity driving much of the conflict calculus in Cabo Delgado province flourishing against the backdrop of fragile state, issues of historical grievances, areas of limited statehood and poor governance. This has been the dominant narrative in understanding Ansar al-Sunna and the *Islamic* extremist movement in Northern Mozambique (Makonye, 2020; Mutasa & Muchemwa, 2021; Ntaka, 2023).

The second face, often overlooked, describes the *jihādi* group as an *Islamic* governing entity that seeks to fill-in the governance vacuum created by limited state presence, insecurity and humanitarian crisis caused by the *jihādi* group's terror, global pandemic and climate shocks. Into this vacuum enters Ansar al-Sunna. While the *jihādi* group's presence has been sporadic, showing patterns of mid-range unpredictability (Tapscott & Urwin, 2025), it has rolled out pockets of social order, control and legitimacy where coercion is the order of the day. Localities such as Pemba and Mocímboa da Praia have become sites of the *jihādi* group's *jihādi* governance, albeit short. Taken altogether, such complexities and fluidities make answering the question of how Ansar al-Sunna operates and governs challenging in Northern Mozambique (Juma & Sabala, 2023; Harawa, 2024; Waschefort, Phyffer & Bradley, 2024). The next section pays particular attention to the complexities of the matter.

When Faith Turns Political? Inside Ansar al-Sunna's Salafi-Jihādi Governance

Although violent extremism in Africa is still mainly a game of machetes, guns and terror, it is strategically embracing new *modus operandi*, means and tactics. Violent extremist groups across sub-Saharan Africa continue to exploit societal fragmentation and poor governance to radicalise, enforce *Islāmic* laws as well as gain power through violence and soft power. This has been the case with Ansar al-Sunna in Cabo Delgado. It is therefore apt to understand Ansar al-Sunna's new *jihādi* strategy, how the *jihādi* group sustains its extremist project, and lastly, understand the perception of the northerners. Often seen as architects of (in)security, the *jihādi* group has embarked on a new strategy to win the hearts of northerners, positioning itself as a *jihādi* group that strives to rectify observable societal injustices and providers of security.

The new strategy of winning hearts and minds (WHMs) comes after the *jihādi* group witnessed an opportunity in chaos caused by socioeconomic challenges, insecurity and humanitarian crisis in Cabo Delgado. Simultaneously, FRELIMO's authority and legitimacy around Cabo Delgado is crumbling and imploding from within. This reality has created a governance vacuum, or as violent extremists' apologists would put it, an opportunity for the Ansar al-Sunna to strive towards filling-in the governance void, address socioeconomic challenges and present itself as a better alternative. Vines (2020) concurs with this narrative arguing that the *jihādi* group inserted itself into the perceived chaotic social order and portrayed its extremist cause as one that is concerned about the wellbeing of northerners. Drawing from the *jihādi* governance scholarship, Ansar al-Sunna has tapped into the perceived 'chaotic social order' by striving to set religiously charged rules, norms and initiatives aimed at initiating social cohesion, institutions and providing basic services (Arjona *et al.*, 2015; Arjona, 2016; Florea, 2020).

Certainly, the rhetoric that "*the government of the day is unjust... whether people like it or not we are defending Ummah and Islam*" (Stanyard, Nelson, Arde & Rademeyer, 2022), presents the *jihādi* group's extremist movement as one that fights against perceived injustices and strives for human security. It goes without saying thus that Ansar al-Sunna is shifting its violent extremist priorities towards power grab and territoriality. The *jihādi* group is no longer just a violent extremist entity that launches sporadic attacks to citizens. Instead, Ansar al-Sunna continues to capture strategic towns and localities across Cabo Delgado. Thus, it is not surprising to claim that the *jihādi* group is shifting from being the architects of terror to being a *jihādi* government-in-waiting. Areas such as Palma, Mocímboa da Praia, Pemba, Quissanga, Nengade, some of which house LNG reserves, have become safe haven for the group's *jihādi* movement in Northern Mozambique (Bukarti & Munasinghe, 2020; Heyen-Dubé & Rands, 2022). The *jihādi* group occupied local communities across local communities to establish *Salafi-Jihādi* aligned rules, justice practices (although harsh) to ensure *wartime political order*, socioeconomic means and provision of basic services to ensure *wartime economic*

order and *wartime [s]ocial order* (Staniland, 2012; Mampilly & Gutierrez, 2023; Arjona, 2016).

Ansar al-Sunna's strategy of WHMs is aimed at crafting local legitimacy, gain control and territoriality. The *jihādi* group has capitalised on myriad challenges faced by the central government, including the inability to address the politics of exclusion, protect the human security of northerners during times of insecurity and climatic shocks as well as the government's challenges to translate resource discoveries into economic gains. Instead, the government endorsed mining activities and LNG projects in Northern Mozambique in local communities, resulting in several northerners losing their land and livelihoods, especially farmers and fishermen (Ndawana, 2023). These dynamics have been exploited by Ansar al-Sunna for recruitment and legitimacy. To gain credibility and roll out the strategy of WHMs, the *jihādi* group continuously exploited politics of colonial and post-colonial exclusion and attempted to address the mounting food and human insecurity, the declining healthcare and economic opportunities for citizens in Cabo Delgado, while simultaneously, presenting the central government as the common enemy. The subsection below thus expand on this thesis.

To exploit the politics of exclusion, Ansar al-Sunna employed the classical tactic of we-ness. This implies that the *jihādi* group ensured that its extremist departure should be based on setting up collective identity informed by the radical interpretation of *Salafi-Jihādi* ideology. This should be understood as the *jihādīs* stratagem to provide legitimacy to their extremist claims. It is worth noting that such identities construct extremist binaries of "us vs them" or what John M Berger calls in-groups and out-groups (Berger, 2018). Such an othering approach is often used by extremists to establish a sense of shared community, purpose and collective responsibility. This approach is important because with such a communal mindset within a *jihādi* governed locality – emerges massive civilian obedience, followers of the extremist network, and local legitimacy – crucial factors for the sustenance of *jihādi* governance across Cabo Delgado. It is not surprising that Ansar al-Sunna hinged on this approach by constructing a manifesto of "us against them", appealing to frustrated communities who have been feeling excluded (Lucey & Patel, 2022), and ensure that there is massive civilian support and to ensure that *jihādi* governance cause gains legitimacy.

Similarly to the description provided by Gurr's work (1970) in *Why Men Rebel*, Ansar al-Sunna capitalised on northerners' feelings of deprivation, exclusion and marginalisation and aggression towards the central government, to establish radical fundamentalist in-group cells. This in-group strategy did not only translate fantasies of belonging to a reality for adherents but also reinforced a much-needed sense of identity and purpose. Essentially, Ansar al-Sunna provided northerners with the sense of identity and coterie–reinforcing the beliefs that ordinary locals are not only *jihādīs* of injustice and providers of security—but they also belong to a community of a much-needed revolutionary movement in Cabo Delgado. Over and above, the in-group approach taken by the *jihādīs* has given loyal northerners social value, especially when juxtaposing it with the quagmire legacies of exclusion in Cabo Delgado. Operating as a government–

in–waiting and as a humanitarian actor, Ansar al-Sunna focused on issues of displacement, food and human insecurity. This comes after Mozambique experienced adverse climatic conditions including cyclones Idai and Kenneth that resulted into the destruction of infrastructure, exacerbated existing healthcare challenges and food insecurity (Mkuti & Tarusarira, 2025). The welfare provision *modus operandi* against socioeconomic woes present *jihādists* as actors that are concerned about citizens human security and wellbeing, as opposed to the central government.

Ansar al-Sunna has presented itself as legitimate actor, especially with the central government’s ineffectiveness to address the humanitarian crisis in Cabo Delgado. Such dynamics provided fertile grounds for Ansar al-Sunna’s strategy of minds and hearts. If anything, Mozambique’s poor governance served as an impetus for the *jihādi* group to establish madrassas with the strategic aim of sheltering, providing food parcels and medicines to loyal northerners, including the elderly, women and children (Vines, 2020). Another issue that fed into the triumph of the strategy has been the “lean” season. This period, marked by depleting food reserves and below average harvests, aided Ansar al-Sunna’s strategy of WHMs. The *jihādi* group presented itself as a reliable provider of security within insecurity. These dynamics, therefore, makes it not impossible to acknowledge the nexus between instability, food insecurity and *jihādi* groups inserting itself as a source of security. These conflict dynamics demonstrates that Ansar al-Sunna’s *jihād* shifted from terrorism towards the struggle of seeing as a legitimate entity and source of security within security in Northern Mozambique.

Perhaps the rhetoric that “*we [Ansar al-Sunna] occupy towns to show that the government of the day is unfair, it humiliates the poor and give the profit to the bosses*” (Stanyard *et al.*, 2022), narrates a story of how the *jihādi* group exploits socioeconomic challenges and push for an anti-State narrative. Gould, Queface and Lima (2024) tell us that Ansar al-Sunna has capitalised on widespread socioeconomic challenges in Cabo Delgado—including the burgeoning unemployment rates, poverty and limited economic opportunities—to mobilise and push an anti-FRELIMO agenda. This plays against the backdrop of displacements of local villagers to accommodate the LNG projects, resulting in northerners losing not only their land, but the source of livelihoods, especially farmers, carpenters, crafters, boat operators, fishermen and others. All this sparked resentment, frustration and lack of trust towards the incumbent government. Ansar al-Sunna capitalised on this reality. The *jihādi* group portrayed its cause as a just-seeking movement that intends to restore and unlock economic opportunities across localities in Cabo Delgado province.

The *jihādi* group tapped into an economic strategy, offering loyal northerners means to earn a living. It has done so in many ways. First, the *jihādi* group introduced numerous *jihādīs* to clandestine trading networks in an area where there is little, if any formal employment exists. Second, the *jihādi* group seized cash from local banks—and such criminality provided the actors with the leverage to establish a monetary system wherein *jihādīs* and loyal northerners were offered membership allowances or wages (Njelezi, 2022). These strategic actions taken by *jihādi* group reflect Mampilly and

Gutierrez's (2023) *wartime economic order* frame that to cater for vulnerable communities with criminality as a tool for human security. This emulates the security within (in)security dilemma. Third, *jihādi group* financed young businessmen (or loyal northerners) to either start or sustain existing businesses. Because of the regions' economic disparity, Ansar al-Sunna's economic strategy is flourishing. Indeed, the *jihādi* group capitalises on Cabo Delgado's socioeconomic challenges—while portraying itself as a capable and legitimate actor that cares about the wellbeing of northerners, as opposed to Sayyid Qutb's "illegitimate" State framing (Ewi & Louw-Vaudran, 2020, emphasis added). The argument therefore is not how the *jihādi* group has become the cause of instability, but how it has strategically staged itself as a source of human security within Cabo Delgado province.

Principally, Ansar al-Sunna's new strategy of hearts and the *jihādi* governance model, characterised by the advancement for human security within Cabo Delgado, emulates elements of messianic politics, as seen elsewhere (Rapoport, 1988; Springzak, 1998; Pirio *et al.*, 2021). The *jihādi* group has pitched its extremist movement across the region as a much-needed divine intervention that aimed at ushering a new era of politico-religious authority. This explains why the *Salafi-Jihādi* ideology, present histories and Mozambique's status quo have been instrumental in this regard—so that the *jihādi* group portrays itself as saviour for several northerners—from social, political to economic fronts. The understanding is that beyond gaining local legitimacy and control, Ansar al-Sunna sought to be viewed as a divine figure that redeem northerners from poverty, socioeconomic woes and societal insecurity. This explains why the *jihādi* group over – capitalised on the ideologies of *al-Salafiyya al-Jihādiyya* for the cultivation of, and promotion for, violent extremist in Cabo Delgado. Abdo and Brown (2016) attribute these dynamics to the rising negative wave of religious democratization in Africa. *Salafi-Jihādi* groups, as it appears, are using religious tenets to compete for rebel legitimacy, control, and territoriality. Examples of this abound. These include *Salafi-Jihādi* groups located around the Middle East, Nigeria, Somalia and most recently, Mozambique.

Most of the aforementioned analyses, especially the political economy of violence and the *jihādi* group's efforts towards rebelocracy in Cabo Delgado, materialised due to complexities. These include but are not limited to complexities of present histories of exclusion, the extremist interpretation of *Salafi-Jihādi* ideology, the government's limited state presence and glocality. This paper holds that where feelings of exclusion and marginalisation, colonial histories, and transnationality appear to shape the status quo, such feelings tend to become impetus for social movements, let alone a *Salafi-Jihādi* movement that justifies extremism and *jihādi* governance. Cabo Delgado teaches us four issues: (1) colonial continuities that inform domestic politics; (2) governmental ineffectiveness; (3) religious radicalisation and (4) *glocality* produce fertile grounds for *jihādi* groups to search for control, local legitimacy and territoriality—to an extent that establishing a *jihādi* governance becomes an attainable objective. These realities are significantly alarming. Questioning what sustains such is crucial. Thus, the following subsection, delves on this issue.

Of God, Guns or Greed? Tracking Ansar al-Sunna's Sustenance in Cabo Delgado

It is puzzling however, given the military presence of foreign counterextremist forces such as Dyck Advisory Group, Wagner Group as well as the Rwandan forces, *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism, instability and *jihādi* governance lives through an uninterrupted proliferation. Questions have been asked and reformulated about the *jihādi* group's sustenance in Cabo Delgado (Chingotuane, Hendricks, van Nieuwkerk & Sidumo, 2020; Makanda, 2023). Three factors stood out. First, organised criminality. Second, cross-border relations. Third, *Islāmic* militancy. These factors have unwittingly aided the *jihādi* group's organisational growth and military resilience. Mozambique's northernmost province is notoriously known for organised criminality (Wannenburger, 2006). This reality has been, and continues to be, the oxygen for Ansar al-Sunna's *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism. Mozambique's *jihādi* group participates within the black market such as illicit trade of ivory, charcoal and timber, to not only increase the revenue streams and its coffers, but fund the resilience and growth of *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism in Cabo Delgado. Thus, links between organised criminality and violent extremism do exist.

Another factor has been the issue of cross-border relations. Ansar al-Sunna leaders have strong *Salafi-Jihādi* ties to societies in Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Congo and Saudi Arabia. This has been particularly evident through the *Islāmic* student exchange program that saw several northerners sent to study Wahhabism abroad. Some joined the ranks of Ansar al-Sunna from other parts of Africa and the middle east. One interviewee argued that “every day, many young people from other countries come to join this group called al-Shabaab...no one knows exactly where they come from, but one thing is certain they are not from here (...) they are individuals with some experience of war...” (Habib, Forquilha & Pereira, 2019). This goes to show that cross-border relations across the northern provinces of Mozambique have aided Ansar al-Sunna's organisational growth and *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism. Furthermore, the *jihādi* group's allegiance to the *Islāmic* State of Iraq and Syria changed the extremist calculus of Ansar al-Sunna altogether. Such developments resulted into the *jihādi* group gaining tactical confidence, finer equipment and intensifying acts of terror across the localities of northern Mozambique (Bonate, Isreal & Rosario, 2024). Unquestionably, the aforesaid dynamics have abetted Ansar al-Sunna's extremist movement across the region.

Much has been written about the origins, the ideologies and the nature of Ansar al-Sunna (Mutasa & Muchemwa, 2021; Bonate *et al.*, 2024). Recently, the debate has shifted towards the *jihādi* group's efforts to gain legitimacy and territoriality. Yet, the voices of those that lived to experience the (in)security of Ansar al-Sunna's *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism are often concealed. Some observers are convinced that the (in)security crisis has been a “story of a drama that is little talked about” (Signifreidi, 2020), especially the narratives of northerners' in areas of security within (in)security. The next section explores accounts of northerners' experiences.

Ansar al-Sunna's Sectarianism, Extremism and Jihādi Governance

This section draws from and builds on established lines of inquiry by scholars such as Habibe *et al.* (2019), Pirio, Pittelli and Adam (2021), Patel (2021), Bonate *et. al* (2024), Feniassse and Mari (2024), Bonate (2024), amongst others, to understand how the ongoing complex dynamics unfolding across northern Mozambique are viewed and understood by local communities that have been subject to Ansar al-Sunna's *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism. Rather than relying on accounts that prioritise security implications to the State, this body of scholarship constitutes a decisive corrective towards security architecture. The subsection thus adopts a bottom-up approach to learn and (re)learn origins, dynamics of *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism, and *jihādi* governance through lens of those that lived to experience the seasons of terror and care.

Northerners, as it appears, especially the conservative local Muslims and broader society, consider the *jihādi* group as protagonist and apostates of the (in)securities. Ansar al-Sunna's extremism has been described as movement that resembles a "third war" (Bonate *et al.*, 2024). This means that the northerners viewed and continue to understand the conflictual dynamics in Cabo Delgado through Carl von Clausewitz's lenses of paradoxical trinity wherein war involves: the actors, citizens and the State. Some northerners have rejected such linearity, arguing that Ansar al-Sunna's extremism resembles some kind of "genocide" (Pirio, Pittelli & Adam, 2021). This paints a grim picture that ordinary citizens across northern Mozambique understands the ongoing dynamics from the vantage point of 'ethnic cleansing'. This comes after the patterns of the *jihādi* group—that targeted certain communities militarily, especially those it deemed *kafir* or *un-Islāmic*. These conflictual dynamics established and continue to brew a culture of fear in Cabo Delgado province. About one-third (32%) of Mozambicans expressed that they fear the *jihādi* group's extremism (Patel, 2021). Some have mentioned the unpredictability of Ansar al-Sunna. Such realities have kept most of northerners fearing the known-unknown within their localities. The sporadic culture insinuates that the form of *jihādi* governance that Ansar al-Sunna is engaging in across Northern Mozambique has not matured into the phase of rebelocracy (Arjona, 2016), but show aspects of *aliocracy* that overlaps with the ultra-aggressive behaviours wherein *jihādīs* hold minimal rule across held-territories.

Insofar as the communities across northern Mozambique are on tenterhooks regarding Ansar al-Sunna's extremism, they also experience untold anxieties due to the uncertainty surrounding the timing of the *jihādi* group's terror. In actual fact, a northerner shared how they "are living in [constant] fear in the villages because at night they [Ansar al-Sunna] come to create terror and often end up taking or [killing] families" (Habibe *et.al*, 2019). Yet, despite the burgeoning culture of fear among communities, some northerners have been cheering on Ansar al-Sunna's presence. Others, particularly the youth, have been convinced that the *jihādīs* "came with good religion, and they [Ansar al-Sunna] are also taking good care of us" (Feniassse & Mari, 2024). Arguably, some northerners have been appreciative of Ansar al-Sunna and *jihādi* governance

efforts, with others applauding its initiatives (Ebrahim, 2020). This comes after the *jihādi* group employed the strategy of WHMs towards loyal northerners – a strategy that emulates aspects of *jihādi* governance where nonstate actors regulate socioeconomic and political spaces within self-proclaimed territories across Cabo Delgado such as Pemba or Mocímboa da Praia.

There are two dominant camps here. One camp understands Ansar al-Sunna as threat to peace and security across Mozambique's northernly provinces. Here, the *jihādi* group is viewed as the architect of terror—actively engaging in some form of 'genocide' targeting certain communities across northern Mozambique, especially Christians and some Muslims. The other camp is strongly convinced that Ansar al-Sunna is an entity that not only educates Muslims the "good religion" but seeks to improve their livelihoods. Here, *jihādi* group is viewed as an alternative governing body. This is against the backdrop of the strategy of WHMs, especially the fact that the *jihādi* group has avoided harm against civilians, presented itself as a humanitarian entity following the climatic disasters of 2019/2020, providing citizens with essential food, medicine, as well as start-up capital for businesses. These initiatives have not only camouflaged the terrors of the *jihādi* group but reinforced the phantoms of security within insecurity and *jihādi* governance.

All this brings us to revert to the three critical questions: (i) does the Mozambican (in)security crisis demonstrate the realities of paradoxes and extremes within a resource-rich but institutionally fragile country? (ii) or do the complex conflict dynamics in Cabo Delgado brings to light the burgeoning desires for legitimacy, territoriality and politico-religious authority among *Salafi-Jihādi* groups in Africa? (iii) If so, what kind of counterextremism initiatives should the government employ to ensure that Mozambique returns to being a "post-conflict success story" or a beacon of hope in Southern Africa, as far as peace and security is concerned? This paper recommends three counterextremist strategies in Northern Mozambique, see below.

Whereto? Towards Countering Islamist Violent Extremism in Cabo Delgado

Out of 70 countries recorded as battling *Salafi-Jihādi* movements, the Mozambican government has constantly been placed among the top 20 governments facing the precarity of *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023). Violent extremism across African borders continues to live through an uninterrupted escalation of terror. Recorded events linked to *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism in Africa have increased to an astounding 17-fold since 2009 (Bacon & Warner, 2021). It goes with saying that Northern Mozambique has fallen into the *Salafi-Jihādi* extremist trap that requires escape tactics. The paper makes three important recommendations as to how Mozambique could restore peace, stability and development.

First, good governance and resource wealth distributions. Mozambique should adopt a turnaround counter violent extremism (CVE) strategy based on the principles of good governance that can feed into forward-looking strategies that could curb the

malfeasance of transboundary glocal conflicts such as *Salafi–Jihādi* extremism in Mozambique. Another necessary prerequisite for sustainable peace is to consider ways that strive for dismantling colonial continuities and strive towards equal resource wealth distribution. It is significant that Mozambique dismantles political, economic and societal exclusions because such ostracism funds the justice-seeking extremist movement in Cabo Delgado (Zicina, 2024).

Second, people-centred strategy. Thus, the central government should ensure that it adopts a strategy of people, by people, for the people. The paper argues that it is significantly important for the Mozambican government to explore people-centred CVE initiatives. As Gwinyayi (2022) rightly argues, a ‘whole-of-society’ approach that incorporates affected communities to mitigate potential (re)radicalisation and establish pathways for societal resilience is a much need strategy in bringing about sustainable peace. Building on the abovementioned account, this review recommends that the government adopt ‘two-way’ engagements where citizens’ voices are taken into consideration. It is important that CVE initiatives create an inclusive space for stakeholders involved, especially the youth and women. This strategy encourages CVE measures to steer towards peaceful initiatives that are not only evidence-driven but reflect local challenges (Basedau, 2026). The approach should not only craft frameworks that prioritise youth opportunities, but finance citizen-development initiatives that can feed into job and skills creation for northerners. Funding youth initiatives could create economic opportunities for northerners and reduce grounds for recruitment, radicalisation and *Islāmic* fundamentalism.

Third, the securitisation of non-traditional security threats. *Salafi–Jihādi* extremism and glocality continues to threaten human security, challenge State presence, capacity and legitimacy in Cabo Delgado enabling *jihādi* groups such as Ansar al-Sunna to thrive, sustain the movement, become more irredentist while aligning their extremist cause to transnationality. The paper argues that it necessary for central governments to securitise non-traditional security threats such as *Salafi–Jihādi* ideologies, climate change, global pandemics, as they prove to be an existential threat to referent objects, including civilian settlement, institutional and security force functionality, as well as border stability (Caballero-Anthony, 2008; Sharma, 2026). Taking a closer look on securitising *Salafi–Jihādi* ideology, Basedau (2026) provide policymakers with an integrated four-tier strategy to counter-*jihādism*: (1) joint strategic partnerships, (2) awareness to localities at risk, (3) evidence based policy, and (4) implementation of policy that reduces motivation for a *Salafi–Jihādi* movement. Countering religious indoctrination is crucial for curbing the proliferating *Salafi–Jihādism* in Northern Mozambique. Thus, addressing religious coexistence would reduce the level of extremist recruitment, radicalisation, religious extremism and social behaviours that mimic terrorism.

Conclusion

The above discussion brings four important issues to the fore. First, the resource-curse debate. Evidence demonstrates, to a certain extent, synergies between resource



discoveries and violent extremism exists. It is undeniably clear that politics of exclusion on resource wealth distribution sparked feelings of resentment, anger towards the government and justified revolt. This paper does not debunk the dominant discourse around paradoxes and extremes; however, it argues that the conflict dynamics in Northern Mozambique owe to frantic factors where the intersectionality of history, society, religion, ideology, politics, economics to transnationality plays a crucial role. These complex factors tend to overlap, producing (in)security as a reality.

Second, ungoverned spaces are becoming testing grounds for the *Khilāfah* (Caliphate). Areas with limited state presence in Northern Mozambique generated opportunities for *jihādi* governance for the *jihādi* group. This inference comes after the research findings demonstrate that poor governance coupled with insecurity and non-traditional security threats such as climate shocks creates grounds for *jihādi* groups to stage their cause as a people-centred movement. *Salafi-Jihādi* groups in Africa are strategically tapping into existing grievances, governance ills and the political economy of violence to drive a burgeoning 21st century extremist agenda: *Salafi-Jihādi* governance. Extremism, as Southern Africa reveals, is becoming more ideologically charged, governance driven, and extremely territory oriented.

Third, the complexities and fluidities associated with studying *Salafi-Jihādi* groups in Africa. Ansar al-Sunna in Northern Mozambique offers a template of complexities and how sectarian groups in Africa evolve to violent entities that compete for legitimacy, territoriality and control. This shift is often influenced by the glocal nature of *Salafi-Jihādi* extremism. Four, perceptions differ on Ansar al-Sunna: while the State, regional and the international community views the *jihādi* group as a terrorist entity, some northerners understand the *jihādi* group as an alternative governing body that provides security within an environment engulfed by insecurity. Findings reveal that the youthful population have considered the *jihādi* group as a legitimate entity that brings “good religion”, while others are cognisant of the fact that the *jihādi* group brings nothing other than “genocidal realities” across Southern Africa.

What should be done with these realities? CVE initiatives should be people-cantered and consider intersectionality: where approaches prioritise dismantling colonial continuities, establish development-oriented programmes, facilitate social cohesion, deradicalise and craft a culture of religious tolerance. Finally, the paper argues that there exists an epistemic need for research that explores the complexities of *Salafi-Jihādi* sectarianism, violent extremism and rebelocracy. Little is understood about, *jihād* norms, laws and governing systems in warzones.

Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interests exists for this manuscript.

Notes on Contributor

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