

**Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale**

|                                 |                                                                                                    |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Bilagsnr.:</b>               | <b>609</b>                                                                                         |
| Land:                           | Den Demokratiske Republik Congo                                                                    |
| Kilde:                          | Jamestown Foundation                                                                               |
| Titel:                          | The Emerging Triad of Islamic State Central Africa Province; Terrorism Monitor Volume; 18 Issue; 5 |
| Udgivet:                        | 11. marts 2020                                                                                     |
| Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet: | 1. maj 2020                                                                                        |

Document #2028313

Jamestown Foundation

## The Emerging Triad of Islamic State Central Africa Province; Terrorism Monitor Volume: 18 Issue: 5

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The ongoing conflict in northern Mozambique has gathered pace over the past several months and shows little sign of abating, despite the Mozambican military and Russian private military contractor (PMC) Wagner's security operations in the region. Islamic State Central Africa Province (IS-CAP) has claimed responsibility for attacks at an increasing rate over the past six months, but the dynamics between various militant cells in the region remain opaque. While the dynamic between local cells in Mozambique is still unclear, there have been mounting indications as to what IS-CAP's overall structure will look like and the logic behind its geographic layout.

IS-CAP's arrival in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in April 2019 came as somewhat of a surprise, despite evidence that ADF members had adopted an inclination toward IS (East African (<https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/africa/Islamic-State-claims-its-first-Congo-attack/4552902-5078826-r8por/index.html>), April 19, 2019). The announcement of IS-CAP's presence in Mozambique was, to a degree, less unexpected given the strong jihadist teachings underpinning the core of the local insurgent group Ansar al-Sunna, which had been ramping up attacks at the time of the announcement. What was peculiar about IS-CAP's presence in Mozambique, however, was the geographic divide between the branch's two components—DRC and Mozambique—and the fact that, on the surface, the armed groups in the two countries have seemingly little to do with one another. Meanwhile, there was already an IS affiliate in Somalia established by al-Shabaab defectors in 2015, which is coincidentally the same year ADF leader Jamil Mukulu was arrested, an event many believe helped further fragment the group more toward jihadist sentiment. Unlike IS-CAP, the IS group in Somalia made its allegiances more publicly known, but had not been recognized as a formal IS *wilayat* (province).

### Building the IS Triad

IS' strength has long been its ability to capitalize on deep-rooted religious and ethnic divides, and its branches that span multiple countries have something specific in common—they are often located in multi-border areas with significant overlap in tribal, ethnic, linguistic or religious groups. For instance, in the Sahel, ethnic Fulani and Dogon people straddle the Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger border area and the local IS branch has leveraged fissures between these communities (see Terrorism Monitor (<https://jamestown.org/program/burkina-faso-and-the-looming-jihadist-threat-to->

coastal-west-africa/), December 19, 2018). Having an expansive area of operations in border territories has significantly benefitted IS in numerous territories, allowing the group to more easily conduct hit and run style attacks, avoid head-to-head military operations, and draw from a larger recruiting pool.

IS-CAP does follow IS' common strategy of coopting or rebranding already established militant groups. The group's geographic structure, however, represents a notable departure from IS' typical strategy in which its formal provinces largely represent a more contiguous territory or area of operations, aside from its province in Southeast Asia, which spans multiple island nations due primarily to geographic necessity. A particularly strong logic, however, exists behind IS' strategy for establishing IS-CAP in this manner, and there have been indicators as to the branch's likely intended form—a triad formed by contingents in DRC, Mozambique, and Somalia.

The first IS-CAP contingent to be recognized was in DRC, and likely represents, at the least, a faction of the ADF. Little is known about how exactly IS courted fighters in DRC, but there is evidence of collusion and links between Somali-based fighters and networks and members of the ADF, including smuggling and recruitment networks and alleged training camps (see Terrorism Monitor (<https://jamestown.org/program/the-cross-pollination-of-east-africas-armed-groups/>), November 18, 2019). Additionally, a Kenyan-based IS financier—Waleed Ahmed Zein—known for working within East Africa reportedly made financial transfers to the ADF (Treasury.gov (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm476>), September 7, 2018; see Militant Leadership Monitor (<https://jamestown.org/program/waleed-ahmed-zein-the-dangerous-terrorist-financier-of-kenya/>), September 30, 2019). It is, therefore, conceivable that IS' initial outreach and current communications were facilitated through similar channels.

IS-CAP's presence in Mozambique since June 2019 is of a similarly mysterious origin with no clear evidence as to the source of the relationship. There is also little available evidence indicating what percentage of the cells responsible for the overall violence are actually linked to IS-CAP. IS-CAP has claimed approximately 28 attacks since June, a fraction of the total throughout that time period. Regardless, there are several common denominators that link fighters in the three countries and likely form the logical basis of incorporating Mozambican fighters into the larger IS-CAP, including ties between militants and smugglers and links back to radical networks—including through Kenya and Tanzanian-based radical preachers—that have long fed the conflict in Somalia and DRC.

The phased announcement of IS-CAP in DRC and Mozambique, without prior formal pledges of allegiance, or acceptances, and the fact that the older and more vocal IS branch in Somalia had not been formally deemed a *wilayat* suggested the potential for its absorption into IS-CAP. IS in Somalia has also faced significant challenges and has struggled to expand its base, making its absorption into IS-CAP a logical step for self-preservation and to project greater strength. Significant overlap exists in terms of the various nationalities that comprise the various militant groups in the region. In fact, a failed upstart, Jabha East Africa, which was announced in April 2016 and sought to gather fighters from Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda hinted at the desire to build

a broader regional IS group (ISS (<https://issafrica.org/iss-today/does-the-islamic-state-threaten-al-shabaabs-hegemony-in-somalia>), November 21, 2016). Jabha East Africa, however, was seemingly an ambitious project without buy-in from preexisting groups and subsequently fizzled out.

IS-CAP's media output steadily increased in the latter half of 2019 and began to incorporate images not only of DRC and Mozambique, but also Somalia, giving the most concrete indications of the Somali branch's eventual incorporation. According to the January 20 UN Security Council report, the IS branch in Somalia has been designated as the command center for IS-CAP to consolidate efforts and loose networks of sympathizers in the region (UN (<https://undocs.org/S/2020/53>), January 20).

### Looking Ahead

A formal consolidation of the already established groups in DRC, Mozambique, and Somalia—even if only nominally—would serve to strengthen the greater collective and build upon Jabha East Africa's ambitions in a more tangible way. The merging of these three would allow IS-CAP to collectively strengthen their image while creating the potential for a more streamlined media strategy and opening up potential avenues for greater resource sharing and collaboration. While reports have indicated that the branch in Somalia will serve as the command center, the various contingents' operations are almost certain to remain rooted in unique local grievances and conflict drivers. Little information suggests that these groups, even if consolidated in name, will coordinate their operations or that a significant increase in military capabilities is likely in the coming months. What is more likely, however, is that the Somali branch will serve as the coordinator in terms of propaganda and will likely leverage the IS financiers already known to have worked within Somalia. Additionally, forming a broader group will help draw in lingering pockets of radicalized individuals from Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, providing broader regional appeal and options in terms of which contingent to join in support of the broader group.

The increasingly global aspect of the conflicts in DRC, Mozambique, and Somalia cannot be discounted, but should not overshadow the fact that they are still, at their core, extremely local phenomena that must be addressed as such. The global aspect, however, will only serve to further entrench these armed groups and spread the IS brand. This is particularly concerning given the fact that it is likely that a significant number of those responsible for the violence in northern Mozambique and DRC are still not fully within the IS fold. The attachment to the global IS brand also raises the specter that the region could draw in veteran fighters or advisors, as well as increased financing, from IS branches elsewhere.

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#### **ecoi.net summary:**

Article on the Islamic State - Central African Province (IS-CAP) (armed conflict in Northern Mozambique; arrival in Democratic Republic of the Congo; IS activities in Somalia and possible integration into IS-CAP)



#### **Countries:**

Congo, Democratic Republic, Mozambique, Somalia

**Source:**

Jamestown Foundation (</en/source/11281.html>)

**Original link:**

<https://jamestown.org/program/the-emerging-triad-of-islamic-state-central-africa-province/> (<https://jamestown.org/program/the-emerging-triad-of-islamic-state-central-africa-province/>)

**Document type:**

Special or Analytical Report

**Language:**

English

**Published:**

11 March 2020

**Document ID:**

2028313

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

