

The Islamic State has ‘provinces’ in Africa. That doesn’t mean what you might think.

Africa’s militant groups retain considerable autonomy, research shows

By Jason Warner

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In March, militants from the Islamic State’s Central Africa Province (ISCAP) attacked the city of Palma in Mozambique. They destroyed parts of the infrastructure, killing and beheading civilians and overrunning sections of the city for days.

Global headlines soon percolated that claims that the Islamic State was involved in the violence were overblown. This analysis centered on arguments that the Islamic State’s central leadership — “IS Central” and based in Iraq, security experts believe — had no command and control over the Mozambican group. The violence in Palma, some argued, was primarily motivated by unemployment and government grievances, not extremist ideology.

The Palma attack raises some questions: What connections do IS Central’s designated provinces in Africa have with the Islamic State Central? How much importance should observers place on the fact that a particular insurgency carries the Islamic State name? Here’s what it means to be an Islamic State province in Africa.

Africa has six Islamic State provinces

Africa’s Islamic State provinces first emerged 2014 in Libya, Algeria and Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula. In subsequent years, the West Africa Province of northeastern Nigeria emerged and, in 2019, it had added to it an offshoot wing, IS-Greater Sahara. By 2018, IS Somalia was declared a province, and ISCAP appeared by 2019. ISCAP has two wings, one in Mozambique and another in Congo. Islamic State provinces — whose cores are made up of insurgents — need not actually control territory, though some have.

The ISCAP-Mozambique wing — whose members are known locally as al-Shabab (distinct from the Somalia-based group) or al-Sunnah wa Jama’ah — initiated violent attacks in earnest in 2017. Members of this group have raided and burned villages and overtaken cities, leaving tens of thousands displaced — and stalled a major natural gas development project.

In 2019, the Mozambique group was announced as one of two wings of the Islamic State’s “Central African Province.” In practice, the Mozambique and the DRC groups maintain tangible, though limited, links with one another.

Why do African insurgents align with the Islamic State?

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to become an Islamic State province, an African insurgent group must pledge allegiance — but IS Central doesn't accord province status to all who seek it.

Why pledge? Militant groups in the Sinai Peninsula and Congo were motivated by the search for new guidance after leadership losses. IS Central recruited other groups directly, including the groups in Libya and Sinai. In the Lake Chad basin, leaders felt pressure from members of preexisting insurgencies to pledge their allegiance to IS Central. For local leaders in Algeria, Somalia and the Sahara, personal ambitions and the desire sought to break away from local al-Qaeda orbits underpinned their pledges.

The exact reasons for the Mozambique group's pledge to IS Central remain unclear. However, as elsewhere on the continent, economic marginalization, ethnic competition and political exclusion have been important motivators for ISCAP-Mozambique's violence — perhaps even more important than Salafi-extremist ideologies.

How do these groups operate, exactly?

Some observers have suggested that even after insurgent groups declare themselves to be provinces of the Islamic State — and vice versa — IS Central's claims of responsibility for local violence are superficial, given that it cannot actually control affiliates.

But one of the defining features of being an IS province in Africa has been precisely the autonomy of these groups. IS Central has never exerted complete command and control over any of its African provinces: No evidence suggests this was ever either side's intent.

Even without IS Central's direct command and control, IS provinces in Africa often become informal IS “norm-adopters,” undertaking activities that resemble those of IS Central. And while the evidence may not suggest that IS Central explicitly directed such behavior, its African provinces have launched large-scale raids of cities, attempted to establish governance, mimicked Islamic State tactics and stoked intra-sectarian divisions in ways that parallel IS Central's moves. For example, the Mozambique group began beheading villagers — a hallmark of early Islamic State violence — in addition to undertaking large-scale raids, like the attack on Palma.

Though not controlling them, IS Central has occasionally offered material support to Islamic State provinces in Africa. At various points, it has sent emissaries, offered guidance and facilitated trainings and funding, evidenced most acutely in Libya, the Sinai Peninsula and West Africa. IS Central also publicizes African attacks in its media outlets. IS Central asserted responsibility for the Mozambique attacks, though it's not clear how much material support and advice it provided.

Local activities can have a globalized identity

Some have argued that in Africa, “all jihad is local.” Yet importantly, African Islamist extremist groups are not only local. Intersecting and overlapping identities — being local and global — exist simultaneously: Groups and militants have more than a binary choice. In Mozambique, as elsewhere on the continent, an Islamic State province's international connections are not called into question simply because the changes it seeks are primarily local and not global in nature.

Where does this ambiguity about direct links to the Islamic State leave analysts, counterterrorism efforts and governments? On one hand, overemphasizing a group's existence as an “Islamic State province” is fraught. Being an Islamic State province does not make an African militant group inherently more dangerous. Moreover, provincial status does not always mean that the group receives material benefits from IS Central: Publicly available data and

extensive research often fails to identify such support. Overstating IS connections can also lead to counterproductive policies to combat terrorism and may needlessly endanger civilians.

On the other hand, ignoring international connections risks overlooking that groups themselves have sought out such branding and that this affiliation shapes how they plan to carry out violence, interact with local communities, recruit members and portray their ideology.

These findings suggest that observers trying to comprehend the recent attack in Mozambique may want to consider the multifaceted nature of Islamic State provinces in Africa — local inequalities and economic strains, rather than extremist goals, may be their primary motivations. Striking a balance between overemphasizing or underplaying African insurgencies’ “Islamic State-ness” may offer a greater understanding of what’s actually happening on the ground.

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Jason Warner (@warnjason) is an assistant professor in the Department of Social Sciences at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where he leads the Africa research profile in the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC). He is the co-author, with Ryan Cummings, Héli Nsaibia and Ryan O’Farrell, of “The Islamic State in Africa: Emergence, Evolution, and Future of the Next Jihadist Battlefield” (Hurst, 2021 — forthcoming). The views contained herein represent only the author and do not reflect those of the U.S. government, the U.S. Department of Defense or the U.S. Military Academy.



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