

The Islamic State on the March in Africa

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Brief Analysis

Local branches now control territory in Mali, Somalia, and Mozambique, setting the stage for new foreign fighter mobilizations, resource extraction opportunities, and perhaps even external operations against the West.

Nearly five years after losing territorial control in its core areas of Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State is once again racking up territorial gains around Africa. In Mali, IS forces **seized portions** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/exploiting-vast-jihad-arena-islamic-state-takes-territory-mali>) of the rural eastern Menaka region and the Ansongo district in southern Gao last year, while foreign fighters reportedly became more interested in traveling to Wilayat Sahel, the group's self-styled "Sahel Province." Elsewhere, IS "provinces" in Somalia and Mozambique have taken over various towns in the Puntland and Cabo Delgado regions over the past two months, further destabilizing the area and in some cases jeopardizing important natural gas projects.

Mali: Piquing Foreign Fighter Interest?

Since early 2023, a trickle of arrests among Moroccan and Spanish jihadist networks has indicated growing interest in foreign fighter recruitment to Mali:

- January 2023: A joint Moroccan-Spanish counterterrorism operation **broke up cells** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#view/1124>) in Chtouka Ait Baha and Almeria, where operatives were helping IS enlist people for the fight in Mali and facilitate their travel to Wilayat Sahel.
- March 2023: Moroccan authorities **broke up cells** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#view/1443>) in Souk El Arbaa, Tetouan, and Larache. In each case, suspects sought to train in IS military camps in Mali.
- October 2023: Moroccan authorities **broke up cells** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#view/2505>) in Tangier, Tetouan, and Inezgane, where they found a manuscript on methods to join IS in Wilayat Sahel.
- January 2024: Moroccan authorities broke up **recruitment and facilitation cells** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#view/2972>) in Tangier, Casablanca, Beni Mellal, and Inezgane that were sending fighters to Wilayat Sahel.

- February 2024: Moroccan authorities **arrested** (<https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2024/02/361097/moroccos-bcij-arrests-isis-affiliated-suspect-near-rabat>) a local in the city of Sale for contacting IS operatives to facilitate his travel to Wilayat Sahel.

In other cases, foreign suspects were not detected until they were already operating in local theaters, sometimes reaching multiple war zones before being caught. In November, four Moroccans were **arrested** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#view/2593>) alongside members of IS-Somalia in Cal Miskaat, a mountainous area in the autonomous Puntland region. Three months later, a pair of senior IS-Somalia members—one from Morocco, the other from Syria—were **arrested** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#view/2996>) in Ufeyn.

In addition to newer recruits, many foreign fighters had already joined IS in Wilayat Sahel years ago, traveling southwest from other countries after the group lost control in Sirte, Libya, and struggled under a heavy counterterrorism crackdown in Tunisia. Although the flow of fighters to Africa is nowhere near what was seen in Syria last decade, even small mobilizations can lead to external terrorist operations in Western countries, as seen with plots emanating from Somalia and Yemen years ago. This scenario is therefore worth preparing for today, especially now that IS has shifted much of its external operations planning from Syria to its Afghanistan “province” (Wilayat Khorasan, also known as ISKP).

Somalia: Taking Territory from al-Shabab

From February to December 2023, IS-Somalia **battled** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#view/2982>) the al-Qaeda branch al-Shabab in various parts of Puntland. Last month, IS announced that it had **taken over** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#view/2983>) villages in the autonomous region’s Bari district.

These developments are particularly relevant because IS-Somalia has become a key node in the Islamic State’s global fundraising networks, connecting financiers from South Africa to ISKP. As noted above, ISKP is now the **most active** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iskp-goes-global-external-operations-afghanistan>) branch in terms of plotting and conducting external operations. With IS-Somalia seizing territory of its own, it could provide even more resources for ISKP’s expanding global target set.

Mozambique: Retaking Territory

After controlling parts of the northeastern Cabo Delgado province from 2019 to 2021, IS-Mozambique saw its territorial grip gradually erode in the face of **counterterrorism campaigns** (<https://acleddata.com/2023/10/30/actor-profile-islamic-state-mozambique-ism/>) launched by the Rwandan military and the Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM). Yet with SAMIM set to **withdraw** (<https://www.zitamar.com/what-does-the-end-of-samim-mean-for-cabo-delgado/>) this July, the IS insurgency has been building itself back up in recent weeks, taking the towns of **Mucojo** (<https://www.zitamar.com/insurgents-seize-key-cabo-delgado-village-from-mozambique-military/#:-:text=Insurgents%20seize%20key%20Cabo%20Delgado%20village%20from%20Mozambique%20military,-Islamic%20State%2Dbacked&text=the%20Mozambican%20military,-Islamic%20State%2Dbacked%20insurgents%20have%20occupied%20Mucojo%20village%20in%20the,local%20sources%20and%20Quissanga>) and **Quissanga** (<https://clubofmozambique.com/news/mozambique-terrorists-occupy-quissanga-town-aim-254151/>) in Cabo Delgado and expanding southward into the Chiure district.

Unfortunately, these developments—particularly the attack on Mucojo, which killed twenty soldiers—suggest that Mozambique’s military will be unable to fend for itself without SAMIM. A total security breakdown appears more likely in Mozambique than in IS-Somalia’s area of operations—local media are already reporting flows of more than 30,000 newly displaced people moving from southern Cabo Delgado to Nampula province.

Meanwhile, the French-based company TotalEnergies **claims it will restart** (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-02-13/islamic-state-raids-mozambique-town-as-total-plans-lng-return?embedded-checkout=true>) its offshore liquefied natural gas (LNG) project near areas where IS-Mozambique operates. Yet as with the declarations of victory that emerged following SAMIM’s military successes, the optimism surrounding these energy plans may be premature. The gas issue is also a useful reminder that counterterrorism efforts are often intertwined with great power competition. Mozambique’s LNG capacity is the fifth largest on the continent, but the ongoing failure to bring it online due to insurgency has only exacerbated international

market problems spurred by Ukraine war shocks.

Policy Implications

Recent events in Somalia, Mozambique, and Mali illustrate the Islamic State’s continued determination to seek territorial control wherever it can, even when the organization’s archenemies in the West tend to regard such areas as lower-priority concerns. These small pockets of control can have a larger impact if they enable IS to resume external operations, expand its financial activity, and disrupt global energy supplies.

Accordingly, Western governments and their local partners should keep up their law enforcement efforts to stem foreign fighter flows to Mali and elsewhere, while also hardening potential terrorist targets in the Sahel and Gulf of Guinea regions. Of course, these efforts will be complicated by Russia’s domination of the counterterrorism space in certain countries amid coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Yet it is still important to work with other partners in the region—while also reminding local officials that the multi-country insurgency has only worsened since Russia entered the picture and replaced the French-led, U.S.-enabled counterterrorism architecture.

In Somalia, the local IS branch continues to play an important role in the parent organization’s global financial networks despite the death of its financial leader Bilal al-Sudani in January 2023. Therefore, the U.S. Treasury Department should redouble its efforts to designate IS-Somalia’s new leaders and its partners abroad, with the goal of disrupting the transfer of funds between IS provinces spanning southern Africa, the Horn of Africa, and South Asia.

Regarding Mozambique, Washington should engage the Southern African Development Community, urging it to extend SAMIM’s local operations past July. Otherwise, IS-Mozambique may soon carve out another governance project in the northwest—and potentially undermine LNG flows at a time when global energy markets remain highly sensitive to further disruptions.

To be sure, more strategically important matters like the Ukraine war, the Hamas-Israel war, and China will continue to hold much of Washington’s attention. Yet allowing IS to stack up wins and build new governance projects could give the group more space to plan another game-changing atrocity that puts it back atop the West’s policy agenda.

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Levy Fellow at The Washington Institute and creator of its interactive [Islamic State Worldwide Activity Map](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#home) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#home>). ❖

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Jul 26, 2024

◆
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Jul 26, 2024



Noam Raydan,
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/houthi-attacks-russia-linked-tankers)



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August 1, 2024, starting at 11:00 a.m. EDT (1500 GMT)



Pari Ibrahim,
Devorah Margolin,
Gina Vale

(/policy-analysis/countering-islamic-states-gendered-violence-and-minority-persecution)

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