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**South Africa, SADC and SAMIM: Some lessons learned from SADC being at war<sup>1</sup>**

**Background**

In November 2023, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) initiated an evaluation of the [SADC mission in Mozambique, \(SAMIM\)](#). The objective was to evaluate to what extent it has achieved its mandated objectives and to create recommendations for a mission drawdown towards its scheduled closing by June 2024. (Anonymous 5 2023) The official story was that the SAMIM had been relatively successful in reaching its primary objective of reducing the capacity of an Islamist insurgency in Northern Mozambique, while the picture amongst personnel on the ground tells a more nuanced story. The assessment happened at a time when the big international multinational energy companies [restarted the construction and build-up](#) of the off-shore gas exploration projects in Northern Mozambique, suspended since the dramatic attack and fall of [Palma on 24 March 2021](#). The decision to restart the construction and gas exploration projects indicates an improved security situation and trust in the future stability of the province of Cabo Delgado. The SAMIM deployment has played a contested but critical role in making it possible for multinational energy projects to resume their activities in the province.

**The conflict in Cabo Delgado**

During my interviews a respondent with many years of on-the-ground operational experience in the province stated, *"Anyone who claims to understand the nature of the conflict does not understand anything. The conflict is complex and multifaceted, and simple explanations cannot be used to understand what is happening. It is not a civil war since it is far too organised, and it is not a radical Islamist war, as was seen in Iraq or Syria since the modus and the brutality used do not match what was seen and used by the IS forces in those conflicts. Something more sinister is going on"* (Anonymous 2, 2023). It is well described in the

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<sup>1</sup> This policy paper constitutes part of a Carlsberg Foundation supported research project titled "SADC at War". As part of the study field-work was undertaken in Pretoria and Cabo Delgado in 2023, and all the respondents have been anonymised (Anonymous in the text) due to the sensitive nature of their positions and the nature of the operations. The respondents came from wide range of backgrounds e.g. military, international development workers, decisionmakers, academic, private security and the intelligence community.

literature that [religious radicalisation](#) took place in Cado Delgado from as early as the 2000s among the predominantly Mwani and Makhuwa ethnic groups. The ethnic dimension is also an important dynamic of the conflict. To reinforce the latter, President Nyusi originates from the ethnic Makonde group, which historically has been seen as privileged and close to the Maputo elites.

The Mwani and Makhuwa groups have been marginalised and form the core of the [Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jamaa](#) (AS) led insurgency. As one informant argued, the AS leadership travelled to a range of mosques in the province to win over the local elders and get them to support the struggle against the Maputo government. (Anonymous 3, 2023) What initially was a local conflict, in mobilising people based on a general frustration with the central government, the religious tool became an efficient and instrumental means of mobilisation. (Anonymous 3, 2023) (Anonymous 4, 2023)

The AS has changed its strategy since [declaring the caliphate](#) in June 2022. (Anonymous 2, 2023; Anonymous 4, 2023) The AS increasingly accommodates the local population, using a winning hearts and minds approach (WHAM). The AS is paying for supplies and providing resources for local communities. (Anonymous 4, 2023) In this way, the AS secured the loyalty of local communities.<sup>2</sup> Several informants highlighted that Maputo elites have strong, direct, and often competing economic ties to the province. (Anonymous 4, 2023; Anonymous 6, 2023) In some instances, these competing interests and even political factional battles in Maputo materialise in supporting different armed groups in the province (Anonymous 3, 2023; Anonymous 4, 2023). These local dynamics have made it difficult for SAMIM to fulfil its mandate. A strong narrative is also that the armed forces of Mozambique (FADM) run and leave their equipment when facing the AS and even work in collusion with the AS, making it an unreliable partner. (Anonymous 5, 2023)

### **The SAMIM and its mandate**

The SAMIM operation was initially supposed to be deployed for a [limited period](#). In April 2021, a pre-mission reconnaissance team concluded that SADC needed to support Mozambique's efforts to counter the threat from AS by deploying a robust military force under [scenario six of the African Standby Force](#) doctrine. The report recommended that the force includes air, navy, and land elements, totalling 2,900 personnel. In mid-2021, [SADC deployed a robust military force](#) to SAMIM consisting of only 1900 soldiers. The primary objective was to reduce AS's capacity and assist the local security forces in regaining control of Cabo Delgado. The assessment team suggested the deployment of attack helicopters, air transport capabilities and intelligence assets much of which did not accompany the deployment. (Anonymous 3, 2023)

The SAMIM deployment unfolded amidst a range of political controversies between the leadership of the host government and the SADC. Nyusi's government had blocked the rapid deployment of a regional force amid the growing security crisis and regional pressure for a reaction. Simultaneously, the Mozambican government also [signed a bilateral agreement with Rwanda](#) and, indirectly, France, facilitating the deployment of a Rwandan force of 2800 soldiers. Meanwhile, AS managed to control major urban centres, moving the conflict from a nascent state to a large-scale and well-coordinated insurgency necessitating intervention from security contingents.

The SAMIM mission had four main strategic objectives: Neutralising the insurgent groups, assist the FADM, offer training and advice to the FADM, and provide humanitarian aid and development. At the [July](#)

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<sup>2</sup> While official representatives, including the FADM, for periods of time, have been pushed out of these coastal zones, schools are not working, but public transport in and out of these areas still functions and are being used by the communities and the AS alike. Attacks against the local population and security forces happen frequently and the drop in reported attacks should not be mistaken for lack of capacity of the AS, but a change of strategy and because the AS is waiting for the SAMIM and eventually the RDF to leave. It has been announced that the SAMIM will leave by [June 2024](#) and it is very unlikely that the FADM, despite receiving training from the US and EU Training Mission, will be able and especially willing to take over the full provision of security of for the AOR of SAMIM.

[2023 SADC Troika +](#) meeting, an internal assessment report was presented, and it was concluded that SAMIM had successfully achieved its objective of reducing the insurgents' capacity and providing assistance to the FADM. However, the mission could not provide training since their Mozambican counterparts could not identify their training needs, and the development and humanitarian efforts have been limited at best. The report also concluded that the mission had suffered from lacking the needed capabilities and personnel, which the troop-contributing countries (TCC) had not provided as promised or which SADC had not authorised. ([SADC, 2023](#)) The differing communication equipment also disrupted interoperability between the different contingents, which, in practice, made operations difficult.

Overall, the fear amongst the SADC members leading to the deployment was that the Islamic State, via its AS insurgency, could create a bridgehead from where it could launch attacks against the entire region. The declaration of an Islamic Caliphate in 2022 stresses the insurgency's threat to the entire region and for the threat to be mitigated rapidly.

During SAMIM's deployment in August 2021, AS controlled large sections of the Cabo Delgado province, especially around urban centres like Mocimboa di Praia, the rural areas outside Palma, and much of the coastline (See map [here](#)). SAMIM had operational responsibility for the Macomia, Quissanga, and Meluca districts, while the Rwandans ran operations in the Palma and other Northern districts. The initial idea was to pressure the AS from two sides and force the AS to leave their bases and the safety of areas they had occupied. (Anonymous 2, 2023) The Rwandans managed to clear their areas from active insurgents, while the SAMIM has been less successful. (Anonymous 5, 2023) The SAMIM did not manage to coerce the AS to the same extent and, therefore, allowed the AS to continue to operate, albeit in reduced numbers. Several respondents highlighted a very problematic working relationship between SAMIM, Rwanda's contingent, and the FADM, where the information was not shared or leaked and where planned operations against insurgents were blocked by Mozambique without any explanation. (Anonymous 1, 2023; Anonymous 4, 2023; Anonymous 5, 2023; Anonymous 6, 2023)

### **Conclusion: Challenges for the military forces deployed in Cabo Delgado**

At the time of writing, [SADC has announced that it is deploying a military force to the DRC, the SAMIDRC](#). Considering that the new deployment to the DR Congo overlaps with the SAMIM mission, there are several takeaways from the SAMIM deployment. The mission in Mozambique has been deployed within a conflictual political environment, sometimes making it difficult for the operation to function optimally. When the host nation and the intervening forces find it difficult to cooperate and coordinate, effectiveness suffers. There has been a significant discrepancy between the capabilities deployed as part of SAMIM and its mandated tasks and the complex security and political situation on the ground. It has been difficult for the mission to launch effective operations, and the force has become too static. The major factors are the lack of air assets, actionable intelligence and hot-pursuit assets. SAMIM contributes to containment, but does not maximise the military options available. The unhealthy reliance on local forces (militia) to provide security for many communities is also a problem.

Another challenge has been interoperability. Incompatible communication equipment and language differences, both internally in SAMIM and especially in operating with the local security forces and interacting with the local population and lowers interoperability. Most of these problems are not new and were already identified during [Exercise Amani Africa II in 2015](#). The strained relations between SADC countries and the host government have made it difficult for the SAMIM to be fully effective and increased the risks to the deployed units. In addition, the unexpected deployment of the Rwandan contingent also complicated the operational environment for the SAMIM since Rwanda seems to be the preferred partner of the host nation. The lack of financing has been a key issue for the duration of the deployment, and the SADC member states need to find ways of securing the needed funding for current and future operations.

Military deployments are expensive, and if not resolved, the persistent lack of funding could deter future

SADC deployments such as the [upcoming DR Congo commitment](#) being foremost in mind. According to media reports, the DRC government has promised to foot part of the cost of deploying the SAMIDRC, while the rest needs to come from the SADC member states and international donors. The latter expectations are vague and not always reliable. However, there might be light at the end of the tunnel for African Union and SADC deployments since the UNSC has agreed on a [case-by-case basis to finance AU-mandated](#) and led peace missions. The use of UN-assessed [contributions for African peace missions](#) has been high on the agenda for African states for a long time and may well assist SADC financially to help fill the void left by the UN mission's withdrawal.

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