

# TLP CLEAR – DISSEMINATION UNLIMITED



(TLP-C) TLP-C JIHAD GROUPS AFRICAN EXPANSION (ACLED) 18 MAY 2026  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The nexus to global hegemonic Jihad and increasing operational tempo of Christian Genocide and Persecution including within the United States today, grew exponentially well before 9/11 and the Global War on Terror, the State Department designation stop at 1997<sup>1</sup>.



## Jihadist groups pose a growing and expanding threat in Africa

<https://acleddata.com/report/jihadist-groups-pose-growing-and-expanding-threat-africa>

<sup>1</sup> Foreign Terrorist Organizations USDOS, Bureau of Counterterrorism <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/> Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) are foreign organizations that are designated by the Secretary of State in accordance with section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), as amended. FTO designations play a critical role in our fight against terrorism and are an effective means of curtailing support for terrorist activities and pressuring groups to get out of the terrorism business.

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**TLP CLEAR – IN OBSCURA CAVEATS APPLY**

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Islamist militants are exerting growing military strength in targeting the state forces and civilians across several regions of the continent. 13 May 2026 17-minute read



Black smoke rises above buildings as traffic passes the Africa Tower monument in Bamako on 26 April 2026, when rebels from the Azawad Liberation Front (FLA) coalition and militants from Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) targeted several areas in the country. *Photo by AFP via Getty Images*

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Nowhere is the threat of global jihadism more severe today than in Africa. Along with a sprawling network of Islamic State (IS) affiliates stretching from western to central and eastern Africa, other groups such as al-Shabaab and [Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin \(JNIM\)](#) operate under the al-Qaeda franchise (*see map below*). Their reach crosses national borders, threatening the stability of African governments and sustaining global militant and smuggling networks.

As we first indicated in our [2026 Conflict Watchlist](#), IS activity is increasingly concentrated on the African continent. It has now reached a record high of 86% in the first quarter of 2026, up from 49% in all of 2024 and 79% in 2025. The growing significance of African jihadists is not just relative to other regions: They are also escalating their activities. In the last four years, they have been more involved in violence across the board and increasingly targeting civilians.

This threat extends across various levels. Domestically, violent Islamist groups are stretching African states' capacities. Interactions between jihadist groups and state forces increased by 42% between 2024 and 2025, reflecting a combination of sustained counter-terrorism efforts and a shift in the militants' goals toward confronting African governments. Some of these groups — al-Shabaab, JNIM, and IS West Africa Province (ISWAP) — are capable of controlling large swathes of territory, conducting complex attacks against high-profile military targets, disrupting critical resource and communications infrastructure, and even threatening state capitals like Mogadishu and Bamako; while smaller outfits like [IS Sahel Province \(ISSP\)](#), [Allied Democratic Forces \(ADF\)](#), and [IS Mozambique Province \(ISM\)](#) engage more in violence against civilians to extort resources, assert control, and attract new recruits.<sup>1</sup>

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This jihadist expansion was made possible by the increasing sophistication of weapons and tactics. While some Islamist groups, such as the Somalia and Central Africa branches of IS, have access to mostly rudimentary weapons and small arms, others have boasted more technologically advanced weaponry. The use of portable satellite internet and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) systems has enhanced the operational capabilities of jihadist groups in West and East Africa, where they increasingly use drones for combat, reconnaissance, and propaganda purposes.<sup>2</sup> JNIM, for example, has led the way in expanding the use of UAVs, from a single reported attack in 2023 to over 80 in 2025. JNIM, ISSP, and ISWAP have also acquired heavy weapons and military hardware in successful raids on military bases and battlefield seizures. The imposition of [blockades](#), the instrumentalization of communal tensions, and the strategic use of violence against civilians point to the continued innovation of tactics by Islamist groups in Africa.

The rise of African jihadists is not limited to purely kinetic elements. They run transnational smuggling networks, extract taxes from populations in territories they control, and present themselves as providers of security and justice, raising considerable resources to sustain their military operations. In fact, their reach extends beyond the African continent: Al-Shabaab is trafficking weapons across the Red Sea and acquiring attack drones from the Houthis;<sup>3</sup> smuggling resources from Mozambique to China<sup>4</sup> and other destinations is sustaining the local IS insurgency; and several foreign intelligence services have uncovered terrorist plots and recruitment hubs linked to ISSP.<sup>5</sup>

Taken together, Africa's jihadists represent an ever-growing, expanding threat. A unique combination of considerable military strength, extensive territorial control, and embeddedness within global trade and ideological networks has turned once-local insurgents into global actors capable of challenging African governments and testing Western interests and intelligence.

Central Sahel and Coastal West Africa: Jihadist groups intensify pressure on states in the region

### Risk profile

- JNIM is likely to maintain military pressure on the Malian regime as it attempts to isolate the capital and ultimately bring down the government, thereby posing an existential

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threat to Bamako. The fallout from JNIM and the Azawad Liberation Front's (FLA) unprecedented large-scale coordinated offensive on 25 April demonstrates the rapid evolution and escalation of the situation. The subsequent withdrawal of the Malian army and Africa Corps from most of the Kidal region, the death of Defense Minister Sadio Camara, and the JNIM announcement of a blockade on Bamako indicate the fragility of the Malian regime.

- The expanding footprint of Islamist groups is directly threatening previously untouched civilian populations. JNIM has increased its targeting of urban population centers in [Mali](#) and [Burkina Faso](#), while [ISSP](#) has targeted urban centers in [Niger](#) and Mali. ISSP has also carried out massacres to assert control in new areas and is likely to continue this approach, particularly against communities involved in militia formation or perceived to be cooperating with the military in western Niger and the Niger-Nigeria borderlands.
- The use of economic warfare will continue as competition between JNIM and ISSP is likely to drive further outbidding, potentially leading to more high-impact attacks against strategic targets. In the first quarter of 2026, ISSP staged complex attacks on Niamey and Tahoua airports. During its latest offensive, JNIM combined multiple tactics, including swarming assaults, armed drones, and suicide car bombs. Meanwhile, ISSP is likely to prioritize its sustained pressure on smaller but strategically important population centers, including Ayorou and Tillaberi in Niger and Menaka in Mali, to expand and consolidate its influence in the Mali-Niger borderlands.

Outbidding between JNIM and ISSP is pushing both groups toward more visible and high-impact operations against strategic targets and critical infrastructure. While this is already the world's most active zone of Islamist militancy, the risks these groups pose will be heightened in 2026 as they increasingly combine improved tactics with greater coordination, including the use of technologies such as armed drones in complex, multi-pronged attacks.

Both groups rely on swarming tactics, especially motorcycle and vehicle-borne assault squads that can overwhelm military positions and convoys, as JNIM has demonstrated in its effectiveness in attacks to overrun provincial capitals in Burkina Faso in 2025. Their evolving military capabilities mirror growth in manpower, diversified revenue streams, access to weapons and equipment, and the integration of new technologies.

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JNIM has also used economic warfare to deprive the state of resources, undermine its authority, and disrupt economic activity. It has done so by targeting mining, construction, and industrial sites and imposing a [fuel and transport embargo](#) around Bamako and the major urban centers, Kayes and Nioro. ISSP has similarly targeted the Niger-Benin oil pipeline through sabotage and carried out high-impact attacks against critical infrastructure and military installations, as seen in the January 2026 attack on Niamey Airport and the March attack on Tahoua Airport.

Drones are emerging as the primary technology-driven risk, as JNIM and ISSP are increasingly integrating them into operations for propaganda, reconnaissance, and strikes. JNIM's use of armed drones has rapidly proliferated from fewer than 10 recorded strikes in 2024 to around 80 in 2025, illustrating a sharp increase. Although drones remain a relatively small part of these groups' broader tactics, their low cost, adaptability, and difficulty to counter make them a growing threat to military, civilian, and economic targets.

JNIM and ISSP pose serious threats to state authority in the central Sahel — in particular, JNIM in Mali and Burkina Faso, and ISSP in Niger — while also driving widespread violence against civilians.

They punish communities perceived to be aligned with state forces or rival militias, carrying out massacres and causing displacement. ISSP has carried out large-scale, high-impact attacks to weaken the resolve of state forces and subjugate populations, while JNIM sustains a broader, multi-front war in several countries.

Pressure on population centers has also increased. JNIM's siege tactics in Mali and Burkina Faso and ISSP's attacks in population centers in Niger mark a gradual encroachment on urban areas (*see graph below*). As part of its expansion into northwestern [Nigeria](#), ISSP has replicated [patterns of violence](#) used elsewhere in [the Sahel](#), carrying out massacres to assert control across southwestern Niger and northwestern Nigeria. Lake Chad Basin: Civilians bear the brunt of ISWAP's intensified clashes with the Nigerian military

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### Risk profile

- The killings of high-level military officers in the last five months and more complex attacks by ISWAP in Nigeria signal an increasing risk for military forces in Borno state, particularly as military camps, bases, and troops' routes increasingly come under attack.
- High-profile attacks — like the multiple suicide bombings in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state, on 16 March — are expected to continue intermittently over the next eight months. Aimed at undermining the government's ability to maintain security in the region, these attacks primarily impact civilians. As attacks continue, civilian confidence in the military is expected to wane further.
- The presence of the already stretched-thin Nigerian military in the region could further weaken in the next four months until the dry season brings weather conditions more suitable for security operations.

Intensified attacks by ISWAP on Nigerian troops indicate a fighting force that is more emboldened and equipped than before 2025 (see graph below). Since early 2025, ISWAP has changed tactics and conducted more complex attacks that happen in succession, over a short period of time. Rather than ambushing state forces or conducting hit-and-run attacks, they target military camps, raid the armory, and attempt to isolate the camps from other troops providing back-up. Moreover, the use of drones and a resurgence of IED attacks indicate that ISWAP is regrouping and gaining leaders with tactical skills within its ranks, who are facilitating these more sophisticated attacks.

However, Nigerian troops have been saddled with several conflicts across the country and thus face challenges of limited resources and ever-changing conflict dynamics. Since March 2025, when Niger announced its exit from the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), they have been left to contend with the insurgency alone, with little to no support from neighboring Niger and, by extension, the MNJTF.

The Nigeria-Niger rift and other factors, such as [Chad](#)'s threat to withdraw from the MNJTF, have had consequences for all three countries surrounding the Lake Chad Basin. In the case of [Nigeria](#), between October 2025 and April 2026, six senior military officers were

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killed by Boko Haram and ISWAP in the line of duty. One was killed during a live broadcast as part of propaganda by ISWAP militants who claimed to have been carrying out a campaign to weaken security forces' operational capacity.<sup>6</sup>

Propaganda remains crucial to ISWAP militants, who have consistently broadcast claims of attacks that they launched against the state. Around November of 2025, they published a video showing foreign fighters who they claimed were in their territory to support their “jihad.”<sup>7</sup> It was published months after the attacks on military camps across Borno, including a super camp — a larger, more fortified camp that the Nigerian military has used in areas with operations against militants since 2019. Given these claims and the realities of security on the ground, citizens continue to lose confidence in the government and its ability to protect them from the insurgency.

As the wet season draws near, there is likely to be a lull in militant activity, which could be followed by a ramp-up in military offensives similar to late 2025 when state forces targeted the insurgents and gained momentum.

Somalia: Al-Shabaab moves its forces to strategic corridors as the election dispute creates uncertainty

### Risk profile

- Increased al-Shabaab presence in Mudug and Galgaduud regions suggests that local security forces face a heightened risk of militant attacks in the coming weeks. The force build-up suggests al-Shabaab is planning to seize military bases, particularly in Xarardheere, by deploying IEDs and moving into the bases in large numbers.
- Business and humanitarian aid traveling near Xarardheere are at increased risk as al-Shabaab sets up checkpoints in Mudug and Galgaduud regions to exploit the economic traffic along the route.
- As clan divisions trickle down to security forces, civilians are at risk from both al-Shabaab and security forces until tensions around the election settle. Al-Shabaab has been targeting civilians involved in the election and, in areas it controls, those perceived as state and government collaborators.

Al-Shabaab is poised to capitalize on Somalia's electoral season, plagued by divisions among politicians and security forces. The end of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's

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term on 15 May exposes fractures along factional and clan lines, which, [like in previous election periods](#), are likely to strain the Somali armed forces and force them to withdraw from military bases, leaving them to fall into the hands of militants.

Yet, al-Shabaab is already mobilizing troops in central [Somalia](#). Since April, reports from

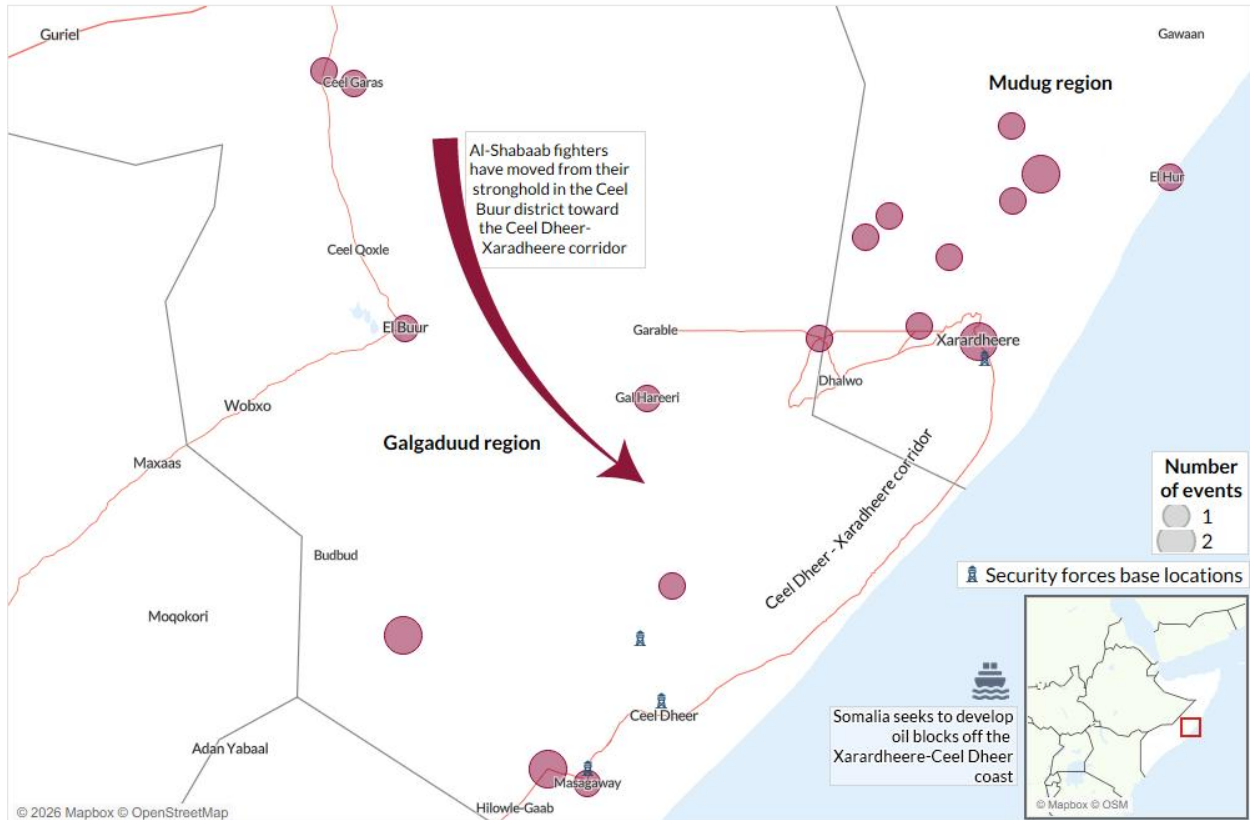
ACLED's local sources suggest that around 1,900 al-Shabaab fighters have moved to Mudug and Galgaduud regions, and that al-Shabaab is ramping up recruitment efforts. The group is eyeing the recapture of the town of Xarardheere, which it controlled for 15 years until the Somali National Army and allied clan militias retook it in 2023 (*see map below*). Xarardheere is a strategic location that connects the Middle Shabelle and Hiiraan regions to Mudug and Galgaduud. For the federal government, the town lies on a vital corridor that links security forces in the front-line regions of Hiiraan, Middle Shabelle, and Mudug, as well as along the buffer zone that protects several oil blocks. The government has a vested interest there as it, with Turkey's support, seeks to develop the oil blocks that are just a few hundred kilometers offshore.<sup>8</sup> For its part, the Mudug region hosts a number of security bases that are, and have been in the last few weeks, vulnerable to coordinated attacks by al-Shabaab. With the kind of manpower moving into the region, al-Shabaab can easily block military movements or isolate them from other forces in Hiraan and Middle Shabelle regions.

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# Al-Shabaab aims to recapture the strategic but vulnerable area centered around Xarardheere town

Al-Shabaab activity in Galgaduud and Mudug in April 2026



Reports from local ACLED sources and the UN suggest al-Shabaab has recently received a large number of weapons and ammunition — including UAVs — from the Houthis in Yemen in early 2026; this indicates al-Shabaab’s effort to bolster its military capacity and intelligence-gathering capabilities.<sup>9</sup> The group is increasingly integrating its current arsenal, consisting of conventional weapons, rocket-propelled grenades, and IEDs, with UAVs for reconnaissance and attack purposes. This external support enables more sophisticated planning and execution of IED attacks and ground operations.

Adding to the risks is the ongoing internal al-Shabaab dispute, which could result in the formation of rival factions. In April, a dispute between fighters loyal to al-Shabaab’s deputy amir, Mahat Karate, and those aligned with the group’s logistics chief, Abdulkadir Mohamed

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Abdulkadir, known as Ikrima, led to internecine clashes in the Middle Juba region and the arrest of the latter and other top leaders.<sup>10</sup> These disputes frequently center on power struggles between operational commanders and those overseeing the group's international jihadist connections. These power struggles, [a long-time feature of al-Shabaab](#), do not necessarily signal the unraveling of the group's territorial gains but may slow down the momentum of its campaign. Great Lakes: The ADF increasingly confronts military forces as it shifts to new areas

### Risk profile

- The ADF has shown a growing willingness in the first quarter of 2026 to engage security forces directly, including through ambushes, marking a shift from its previous aversion to direct confrontation. These attacks have yet to target larger military bases, but instead tend to strike military patrols or soldiers guarding economic sites.
- For civilians and humanitarian actors, the risks remain severe, including from high-fatality massacres, mass abductions, and displacement. While civilians in Beni territory remain threatened, the ADF's Abwakasi camp presents a heightened risk to civilians in Lubero and growing danger in Mambasa as Musa Baluku's camp moves westward and north into Haut-Uele.
- The group's presence in resource-rich areas also threatens mining operations, as the ADF extracts rents from mining activity and disrupts trade routes. The ADF poses increasing threats not only to artisanal miners but also to industrial operations. An attack on a Chinese-operated mining area in Mambasa territory in March resulted in over a dozen reported fatalities.

Strained by the [March 23 Movement \(M23\)](#) rebellion, the Congolese military and allied Ugandan forces have forced the [ADF — also known as the Islamic State Central Africa Province \(ISCAP\)](#) — away from areas near the Ugandan border but have limited capacity to contain the ADF from simply moving westward (see map below). An escalatory pattern, consisting of a growing use of mass kidnappings, increasing willingness to directly confront military forces, strategic violence at mining sites, and a geographically expanded area of threat to civilians, instead suggests that the ADF is unlikely to abandon historic bases around Beni territory even as the group projects violence into new areas.

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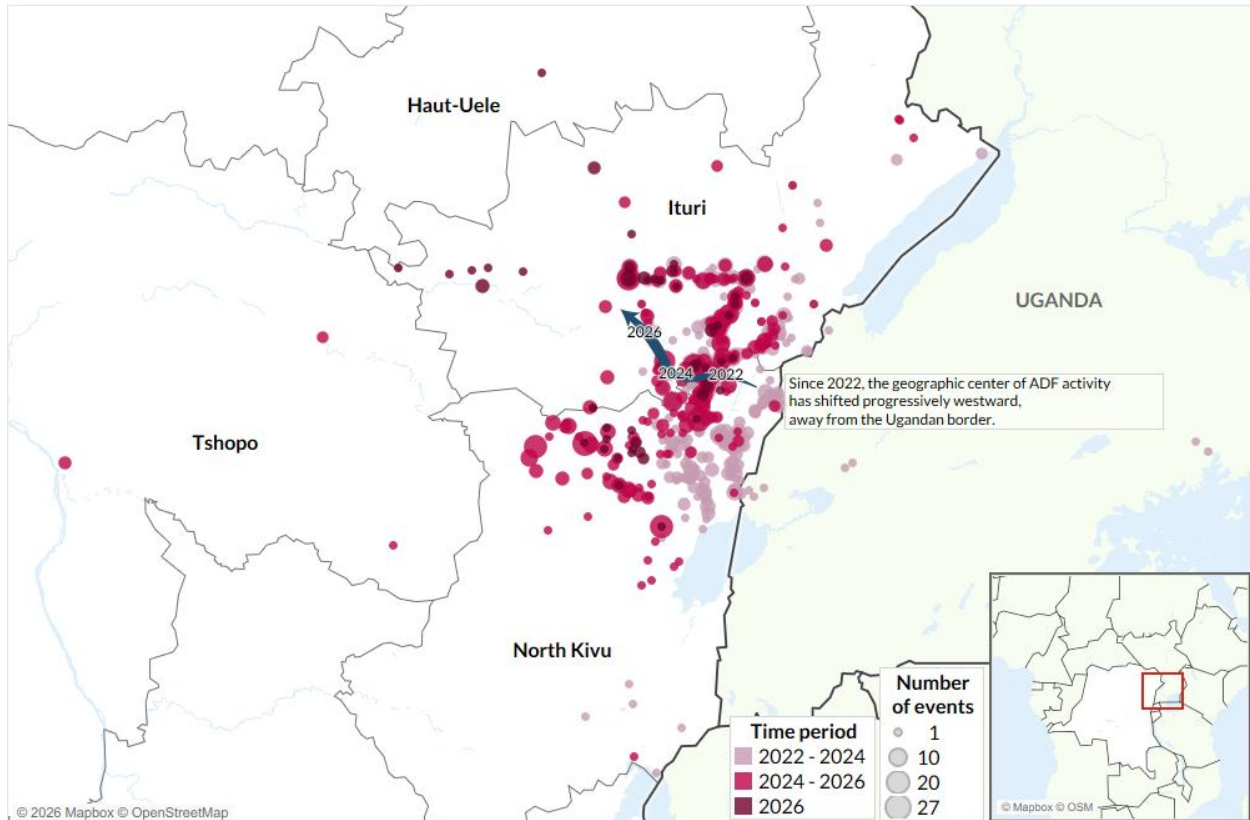
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### Congolese and Ugandan forces lack capacity to contain the ADF from moving westward



Violence involving the ADF between January 2022 - April 2026



Interactive Map is on this website.

Despite military pressure, the group has expanded its abductions in 2026 and uses mass kidnappings as a tool for coercion, intelligence gathering, and recruitment. An escalation of violence involving the ADF in Mambasa territory in 2026 and sustained increases in operations in Lubero territory since 2024 highlight the group's ability to shift and regenerate under pressure. Among Islamist groups in Africa, the ADF stands out for its persistent focus on civilian targeting rather than territorial or strategic military campaigns. It is the [second deadliest armed group to civilians in 2025](#).

Therefore, the ADF may not pose the same strategic threat to governments as more territorially ambitious IS affiliates, but its mobility and sustained targeting of civilians

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undermine stabilization efforts and strain already limited security resources. Ongoing joint military operations with the [Congolese](#) and [Ugandan](#) forces are unlikely to eliminate the threat in the near term and may instead reinforce a pattern of adaptation, relocation, and persistent low-intensity violence.

In contrast to more technologically advanced IS affiliates elsewhere on the continent, the ADF tends to rely on simpler weapons, primarily small arms and bladed weapons. These weapons still pose risks to civilians and enable opportunistic advances against military forces, but will not allow sustained combat or the establishment of control over broader areas.

The group has received some external support to develop limited explosive capabilities through IS-linked networks, but makes comparatively infrequent use of IEDs or rocket-propelled grenades. However, the group could make further use of its surveillance drones, though the ADF has yet to adopt weaponized drone systems at scale. Arson remains a defining feature of its operations. Fighters routinely loot and burn villages following attacks that will pose continued threats to civilians and economic activity in the year ahead, especially as the group advances into the gold-rich Haut-Uele province.

Mozambique: IS seeks political legitimacy in an enclave on Cabo Delgado's coast, despite international presence

### Risk profile

- ISM is presenting itself as an alternative authority in coastal Cabo Delgado. This will further erode government control of coastal areas and nearby urban centers such as Mocímboa da Praia.
- ISM increasingly targeted civilians in southern Cabo Delgado and Nampula in 2025. Such attacks are likely in the next 12 months and will continue to hinder state, community, and private sector development.
- In recent months, Rwanda has threatened to withdraw its forces unless the Mozambique government and oil companies operating in Cabo Delgado make payment arrangements. Nevertheless, Rwandan forces will remain in place for at least the next 12 months.

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A small enclave under the influence of ISM persists between the coast and the N380 highway in [Cabo Delgado](#) province (see *maps below*). Since 2022, the group has adopted a less violent, though still coercive, posture toward communities there. Looking to build on historic resentment of the ruling party, Frelimo, and assuming its ideological message will reach predominantly Muslim communities, ISM [seeks to establish political legitimacy](#) there. International intervention, which began in 2021 and reduced the group to just 300 fighters, drove this shift in tactics. Prior to the intervention, the group had over 2,000 fighters and threatened to violently take control of much of Cabo Delgado province.

Away from coastal areas, ISM's violence targeting civilians is increasing. On main roads at the margins of its area of influence, ISM kidnaps civilians for ransom, which constrains the movement of people and goods, including humanitarian aid. To the south, in rural areas of southern Cabo Delgado and in Nampula province, the group is attacking communities. The intended impact of such advances is [displacement](#), which complicates humanitarian and security responses. More attacks can be expected in the coming months.

Rwandan President Paul Kagame's threat in April to withdraw troops has raised the prospect of a change in the security architecture in northern Mozambique.<sup>11</sup> With over 5,000 soldiers in Cabo Delgado, Rwanda has been essential to securing the liquefied natural gas project in the north of the province. The deployment has been maintained by a mix of external funders, particularly the European Union. [Mozambique](#) has not been able to fulfill its commitments to the Rwandan presence, and it now faces considerable economic headwinds that will further shrink its fiscal space.<sup>12</sup> However, new funding arrangements will likely support Rwanda's continued presence, making its withdrawal unlikely.

[Webinar | Connected insurgencies: The global evolution of jihadist groups](#)

Watch the recorded conversation with regional experts where we explore the overlapping patterns of jihadist movements across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Register now!

**12:00–13:00, 14 May 2026, GMT**

**Explore further**

Footnotes

1. [1](#)

In the past four years, civilian targeting has accounted for between 49 and 65% of all violence involving smaller groups such as IS Sahel Province (ISSP), Allied Democratic

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Forces (ADF), and IS Mozambique Province (ISM); for larger groups — Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Shabaab, and IS West Africa Province (ISWAP) — the proportion is between 11 and 32%.

2. [2](#)  
[Célia Cuordifede, “Starlink: The newest asset for rebel and jihadist groups in West Africa,” Le Monde, 15 July 2025; Barbara Morais Figueiredo, “The Use of Uncrewed Aerial Systems by Non-State Armed Groups: Exploring Trends in Africa,” United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 30 January 2024](#)
3. [3](#)  
[United Nations Security Council, “Letter dated 15 October 2025 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen addressed to the President of the Security Council,” 17 October 2025, p. 17-19](#)
4. [4](#)  
[Environmental Investigations Agency, “Shipping the Forest,” 14 May 2024](#)
5. [5](#)  
[Lucas Webber and Paweł Wójcik, “The Islamic State Sahel Threat Is Transnational,” Foreign Policy, 31 March 2026](#)
6. [6](#)  
[Promise Eze, “AT A GLANCE: Top military officers killed by terrorists since start of Boko Haram insurgency,” TheCable, 11 April 2026](#)
7. [7](#)  
ACLED monitors primary sources of information on armed group activity, including their official channels and accounts, but does not directly link to such sources in order to minimize the risk of amplifying extremist content.
8. [8](#)  
[Mohamed Abdi, “Somalia’s Petroleum Minister: Curad-1 oil well to be drilled offshore Galmudug State,” Dawan Africa, 10 April 2026](#)
9. [9](#)  
[United Nations Security Council, “Letter dated 15 October 2025 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen addressed to the President of the Security Council,” 17 October 2025, p. 17-19](#)
10. [10](#)  
[Aw Dacar, “The Arrest of Ikrama and the dispute with Al Shabaab,” Goobjoobg, 26 April 2026](#)

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**TLP CLEAR – IN OBSCURA CAVEATS APPLY**

# TLP CLEAR – DISSEMINATION UNLIMITED

11. [11](#)

[YouTube @JeuneAfrique “Rwanda/RDC : Exclusive interview with Paul Kagame,” 3 April 2026 \(French\)](#)

12. [12](#)

[Can Sever, “Growth Challenges and Policy Priorities in Mozambique,” International Monetary Fund, 27 February 2026](#)





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### [Traffic Light Protocol (TLP) Definitions

Color	When should it be used?	How may it be shared?
 <b>TLP:RED</b> For the eyes and ears of individual recipients only, no further disclosure.	Sources may use TLP:RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon without significant risk for the privacy, reputation, or operations of the organizations involved.	Recipients may therefore not share TLP:RED information with anyone else. In the context of a meeting, for example, TLP:RED information is limited to those present at the meeting.
 <b>TLP:AMBER</b> Limited disclosure, recipients can only spread this on a need-to-know basis within their organization and its clients. Note that <b>TLP:AMBER+STRICT</b> restricts sharing to the organization only.	Sources may use TLP:AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon, yet carries risk to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.	Recipients may share TLP:AMBER information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm. Note: if the source wants to restrict sharing to the organization only, they must specify TLP:AMBER+STRICT.
 <b>TLP: GREEN</b> Limited disclosure, recipients can spread this within their community.	Sources may use TLP:GREEN when information is useful to increase awareness within their wider community.	Recipients may share TLP:GREEN information with peers and partner organizations within their community, but not via publicly accessible channels. TLP:GREEN information may not be shared outside of the community. Note: when “community” is not defined, assume the cybersecurity/defense community.
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