

'Total' Transformation or 'Total' Chaos? Mozambique's LNG Saga Continues

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At the recently concluded [COP28](#), states, multinationals, lobbyists and civil society committed to the transfer away from fossil fuels. A month later, TotalEnergies (Total) is set to resume its 23 billion dollar liquified natural gas (LNG) project in Mozambique, paused in April 2021 following terror attacks on the project site. Also set to happen this year is the withdrawal of the Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM), which played a crucial role in the counterinsurgency that followed. This would be alarming to investors who are aware of just how ill prepared local forces are to fill their shoes. In the coming months, other multinationals looking to benefit from the Mozambique's resources will be watching to see if Total's Mozambican project will be foiled by insecurity once again.

Total, which has been in Mozambique since 1991, has a stake of [26.5%](#) in the project and indicates that it will create 15,000 jobs (of course, this is yet to be seen). While impact estimations are all hypothetical, as Africa's largest foreign direct investment (FDI) project it will likely have a significant impact on the region's economy and generate large amounts of revenue for the state. At face value, this is undeniably a good thing.

Total also has a lot to gain. The invasion of Ukraine led to Europe's quest to seek new suppliers and renewed its interest in Mozambican gas. The additions due to be made by Total and Exxon Mobil (the American multinational oil and gas producer) to existing infrastructure (managed by Italian energy company ENI) could yield [31 million tonnes](#) of LNG per year, which is more than 30% of liquid gas imported by the EU in 2022. With estimations like these, Total's delay may come as a surprise; however, insecurity has been and remains the single greatest obstacle to the project.

In March 2021, Total declared [force majeure](#) on the project, known as the Mozambique LNG project, as a result of the insurgent attacks and unstable security situation. This followed the Islamic State (ISM) attack on the town of Palma in Cabo Delgado province where the project site is located. An [independent investigation](#) concluded there were 1402 dead or missing as a result of the attack, of which 55 were

said to be Total contractors. It was a disaster for the project, as well as for the Mozambican economy – it lost out on LNG revenue and job creation, and other FDI projects as investors were scared off.

Total had previously paused operations and evacuated staff in January of 2021 following ISM attacks in the area, only to reopen again in March. The return to work seemed to trigger the deadly attack, and [survivors and relatives of the deceased are suing](#) Total for failing to adequately assess the threat the insurgents posed.

This time, Total is being more careful. The Chief Executive, Patrick Pouyanné visited the site in February of 2023 and hired humanitarian expert Jean-Christoph Rufin to assess the risk in the region. [Rufin's report](#) essentially gave Total the go-ahead it needed, or at least, [Total has seemingly interpreted it that way](#). First, it claimed the root of insecurity was unrelated to the presence of natural gas, supposedly putting to bed concerns that any extraction project would be doomed. Second, it assessed the current state of security in the region, finding that it has improved since 2021. Third, Rufin made a series of suggestions for measures Total could take to improve livelihoods and security in the region. The report suggests updating asset inventories, providing agricultural land, facilitating access to fishing areas, finalising the industrial site's resettlement plan and compensating affected individuals. On their website, Total has agreed to finalise village resettlement (housing with solar energy), update asset inventories, expedite compensation payments, facilitate agricultural access, and provide transport for Quitunda fishermen.

Given the report's findings and Total's recent activity in Mozambique, it seems that the project will go ahead, after nearly three years. Total has been in communication with Exxon Mobil and ENI; and in November, the three multinationals convened in Maputo with the European Union Energy Commissioner to discuss future gas projects. Exxon has apparently been waiting to see if Total will resume work before going ahead to announce its own LNG project in the area. The French minister of state development Chrysoula Zacharopoulou also visited Maputo in early December to support project resumption preparations.

While the relaunch of the project is seemingly imminent, the question as to the likelihood of a repeat of March 2021, remains. The lack of publicity around the relaunch hints that Total is nervous about the possibility of another attack. Total's digression in Mozambique is a glaring juxtaposition to its public-relations drive in South Africa following the go-ahead to drill offshore for oil and gas in the Western Cape.

What led to the attack in Mozambique?

While Rufin's report claimed that the LNG project was not a key factor affecting insecurity in Palma, eight other contributing factors were identified. First, inequality between the north and south of the country has allegedly created conditions for insecurity. The south of the country, bordering on the historically large mining nations South Africa and Zimbabwe, has had a higher level of development dating back to the colonial era given its more strategic location for economic activity, while the north has largely been left underdeveloped. Ethnic rivalries loosely related to a Christian-Muslim religious divide also play a part supposedly. These ethnic groups also relate to sides in the civil war which ended in 1992, when RENAMO, popular in the region, was forced to disband.

Lack of public services, the exploitation of natural resources other than natural gas (specifically rubies) in the area, and the presence of mafia activity are also said to be important factors. Poor public service delivery has meant that the region has become a trafficking hotspot for mafia groups. Drugs, illegal migrants heading to South Africa, precious stones, ivory and poached animals making their way through the port of Mocimboa da Praia create a great incentive for rebel groups to perpetuate insecurity. The report also highlighted regional influences (Tanzania, the DRC and Somalia), and the spread of international jihadi terrorism as root causes of instability.

While the LNG project cannot be said to be the sole cause of insecurity in the area, it certainly seems to have contributed to it. According to [ACLED \(Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project\)](#), the LNG project was not unrelated to ISM and insecurity in the area. Representing foreign investment, state interests and collaboration with the west, as well as a point of grievance for displaced locals, the project was a target for ISM. Throughout 2020 the group conducted a series of attacks in the Palma district, shifting away from civilian attacks to state institutions and symbols of the state, such as the Total project. The interest the ISM had in undermining the project is reflected in its July 2020 al-Naba newsletter, where it emphasised that "crusader oil companies" were a justifying factor for their waging conflict. On 1 January 2021, the Quitunda village built to house those displaced by the LNG project was attacked, and Total evacuated its staff the next day before returning in March, when the project was promptly attacked by the insurgents.

Who are the ISM?

ISM emerged in October 2017, but can be traced back to Somali jihadi networks entering northern Mozambique around 2007. Initially an offshoot of the infamous Somali extremist group Al-Shabaab, the

group was initially known as al-Sunna Wal-Jamma (ASWJ) before publicly associating itself with the Islamic State (IS). ISM remains one of IS's least understood affiliates. It was formally acknowledged as a distinct IS province in May 2022, previously part of the broader Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) from at least 2018. During its early growth phase, in 2010 natural gas was discovered offshore of Palma town by oil producers Andarko, and the project to extract the gas developed as ISM grew.

The group saw rapid growth in numbers until 2019, consolidating its forces between 2020 and 2021. By 2019, Total had acquired Anadarko and finalized the extraction project, making it a target for local insurgents. Counterinsurgency initiatives by the Rwandan Security Forces (RSF) and SAMIM significantly disrupted the insurgents following the attack on the project. Violent incidents perpetrated by ISM have been in decline since late 2022.

How likely is a repeat of 2021?

Insecurity – with a repeat of 2021 – is the single greatest threat to the project. Rufin's report is positive regarding the security status of Palma, but it does warn of potential for future insecurity. The counterinsurgency in 2021 was largely successful as it liberated most towns from ISM, whose numbers have since dropped from [2500 in 2021 to roughly 350 in 2023](#). Instability then spread inland to Mueda and south to Nampula, where there are now active groups in Macomia and Motepuez. The Palma-Mocimboa Road (an important port route) is currently secure, and a large proportion of the displaced population has since returned to Palma. Despite these developments in the Palma area, insecurity persists and experts have warned of a "security vacuum" following the withdrawal of SAMIM forces (currently 1900 personnel in Cabo Delgado), due to happen this year.

ACLED also asserts that ISM activity, while limited, still hampers state forces through IED attacks in Macomia. They also warn that despite reduced capabilities, ISM can still resupply through clashes with Mozambican Defense Armed Forces (FADM) and trade with villagers in Macomia. Supported by transnational jihadist networks and links to armed groups in the DRC and Tanzania, ISM may persist in Macomia.

The group's future hinges on the efficacy of state forces, which have thus far been unhelpful. According to [Alex Vines of Chatham House](#), local Mozambiquans have asserted that they feel safer when Rwandan forces protect them, and that the FADM are unhelpful when insurgents attack. Experts (allegedly including SAMIM personnel themselves) question the preparedness of Mozambiquan forces to take over when SAMIM does withdraw, with multinationals assuming (or hoping) that Rwanda will continue

to provide their operations with protection. The EU is set to vote on renewing the training initiative they have with Mozambiquan forces, and France (nudged by Total) will likely be pushing for the renewal.

Mozambique's LNG project illustrates the direct relationship between FDI and matters of insecurity. FDI demonstrates varying sensitivities to risk factors, including political and security matters. Resource-seeking FDI is often more resilient to risk factors than other types of investment, however, there are limits to this. Total's withdrawal in 2021 is the perfect example: African countries cannot rely on the appeal of their resources alone, especially where there is insecurity. These insights provide a valuable lesson for other African nations facing similar challenges.

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