Twitter Thread by Dino Mahtani

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The tragic events in #Palma, #CaboDelgado #Mozambique, over the last few days have major implications for peace and security on the Swahili coast of East #Africa. Herewith some thoughts in a mega thread -->

This is an insurgency that has been snowballing since October 2017. It started attacking in the form of small groups of young men, brandishing mainly blunt weapons, and attacking remote security posts. It has evidently now grown into something much more serious.

Recently the U.S. sanctioned the group and called it an affiliate of #IslamicState. By doing so, the group has now been elevated into a box where policy solutions designed to deal with this problem will now be partially framed or qualified by that designation.

If you peer a bit closer, you will see that the insurgency did not come from nowhere. In fact it has grown out of historical factors, out of grass roots grievances, and has developed partially along ethnic lines before becoming the monster it is today.

The insurgents, known by locals as "Al-Shabaab" (or "the youth") are a mixed bunch, and include foreigners, mainly Tanzanians, but you can see domestic constituencies. Many are coastal Mwani youth, or Makwa men, from the west and southern hinterlands of Cabo Delgado.

Among them include petty traders, small time smugglers, former fishermen and farm boys. There are also some miners who were thrown out of ruby mines in the west of the province in 2017.

There are even one or two Makonde, which is unusual, because the Makonde are mostly Christians, and the ethnic group of President Filipe Nyusi, and many of the older generation of anti-colonial war liberation heroes who went on to dominate business and politics in Cabo Delgado.

By and large though, you can see that there are some ethno-political cleavages there. That is not to suggest this is an ethnic conflict pitting the Mwani and Makwa against the Makonde, however. To portray it that way is a gross oversimplification.

To a degree, religion, or quasi-religion, played a role. The frustrated Makwa and Mwani boys who began rebelling against local religious leaders in 2007 had obviously picked up some religious ideas which they used as the vehicle to rebel. Lets look at them:

Many had probably picked up some elements of Qoranic teaching at Wahhabi mosques and madrassas that had started proliferating in Northern Mozambique from the 1990s onwards.

These mosques were built by friends and associates of the Islamic Council of Mozambique, dominated by Wahhabis who became useful to the state at the time because they were a way for Maputo to come closer to the Islamic community, but also to wealthy Arab states.

While living peacefully in Mozambique, Wahhabis however introduced forms of scripture and ideology that can be often be misunderstood by young minds that do not have the literacy to engage with the scriptures appropriately.

In addition, local "Al-Shabaab" boys were also consuming East African Swahili propaganda content of the late Kenyan radical Aboud Rogo, whose connections to Al Qaeda in East Africa and to the Al-Shabaab group of Somalia are well known.

So taking on the appearance of jihadis, with their rudimentary, warped and mixed understanding of Islam, the insurgents started challenging local religious and community leaders, including local imams supported by the Islamic Council of Mozambique itself. The rest is history.

As you can see, this situation is a lot more complex than the idea of just calling these guys "Islamists", or "jihadis", or even Islamic State to say the least. That does not mean however that there is not an internationalist dimension to this. There is.

The largest components of the insurgents are Tanzanians. These include a number of former traders and miners who were the low level business partners of many of the petty traders I described above. Some also come from Rogo influenced radical madrassas in Tanzania.

Remember, this is the Swahili coast. So, many of these Mozambicans and Tanzanians have seafaring experience. Some of the Tanzanians, or at the very least their associates, we know as far back as 2012 had travelled to Somalia to fight with Al-Shabaab back then.

At the same time, you also had a few associates of Somali pirates at the time, sitting in the Cabo Delgado port of Mocimboa da Praia (now out of government control) storing fuel drums and enjoying a bit of R and R. So this was a febrile environment for all kinds of illicit trade.

The biggest illicit trade is of course drugs. Lots of heroin and amphetamine from Afghanistan comes down to the Makran coast in Iran and Pakistan, and then is transported to the East Africa or Swahili coast seaboard, otherwise known as the "heroin coast".

Most of those involved on the Africa side of the trade are powerful elites and those who have the money and privilege to get in the mix of this lucrative trade. So we are not talking about "jihadists" who are controlling the trade.

However the smuggling vessels that this narcotics is shipped in on are mainly ocean going wooden dhows from India and Pakistan, and which often bunker their illicit cargoes into fishermen smugglers who bring the stuff onshore.

These fishermen smugglers are also sometimes the guys trafficking Somalis, East Africans and Mozambicans up and down the Swahili coast. So there is a whole policy issue here about what to do about all this illicit traffic on the seas in a way that doesn't kill off livelihoods.

I heard this week that #EuropeanUnion has been discussing extending the geographical scope of Operation Atalanta, the former piracy force to extend its zone of operation down into the Mozambican channel, but that questions over finances have led this to a dead end for now.

Coming back to other forms of international connections, the big one everyone is talking about is #ISIS. We published this explainer on how the connection between Mozambique's Al-Shabaab is weak, but that does not mean it is not trying to get in there. https://t.co/3HnpN5tHP3

While Mozambique and partners develop a security response and debate how they might retake the ports of Palma and Mocimboa da Praia, they may need to consider grass roots grievances, and how addressing them can incentivise insurgents to lay down arms and win back the population.

Just to correct a typo above. When I say that the largest component of insurgents are Tanzanians, I mean the largest component of foreigners are Tanzanians. The biggest cohort of fighters are Mozambicans. Thanks @alanboswell for flagging up.

Also the dhows I refer to should read Iran, India and Pakistan.