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Gold Rush Jihadists? The Lurking Threat of Resource-Driven Violent Extremism in Southern Africa

By Charles Moyo

As the world races for critical minerals, illegal gold mining in some parts of Southern Africa is emerging as more than an economic and environmental problem; it is also a national and regional security threat that extremist and criminal networks can exploit. Zambia is a clear example, where recent reports of armed, undocumented, and [violent miners](#) have raised concerns about illicit mining as a national security threat. In January 2026, Lt Gen Geoffrey Choongo Zyelee, Commander of the Zambia Army, raised alarm that illegal small-scale gold miners posed a serious threat to Zambia's national security due to their violent and illicit financial activities, including drug trafficking and the presence of armed irregular migrants from different countries across the African region. Zambia's proximity to the DRC, combined with Mozambique's insurgency and cross-border mobility, increase the risk of gold-related extremism. This brief examines how gold rushes, illicit financial flows, and weak regulation could contribute to violent extremism not only in Zambia but across Southern Africa, and what governments can do to prevent this risk from deepening.

Peace and Security Landscape in Southern Africa

Southern Africa is often considered one of the more peaceful regions in post-colonial and post-Cold War Africa. However, the region continues to grapple with violent intrastate conflicts and latent security [risks](#). Political instability in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), political crises in Lesotho, and the insurgency in Mozambique are notable security threats in Southern Africa from the last two decades. In 2021, threats to peace and security in the region manifested in violent protests, particularly in South Africa and Eswatini (formerly known as Swaziland). In Eswatini, pro-democracy groups demanded political [reforms](#) while in South Africa, the arrest of former President Jacob Zuma triggered violent social unrest, a crisis that has continued in the form of economic nationalism and anti-migrant protests.

In recent years, the Southern African region has also experienced unconstitutional military takeovers. The November 2017 'soft' military coup that dislodged President Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe and Madagascar's military coup on October 14, 2025, are cases in point. In Madagascar, the elite CAPSAT military unit [overthrew](#) President Andry Rajoelina following weeks of youth-led anti-government protests.

Electoral violence is also becoming an albatross around the neck of some Southern African countries. For instance, Zimbabwe's 2018 post-election protests resulted in six [civilians being killed](#) and 35 others seriously injured. In Mozambique, the 2024 [post-election](#) violence resulted in more than 300 people being killed and hundreds more being injured. In Tanzania, a commission of inquiry set up to investigate the 2025 general election violence indicated that [518 people died](#) from 'unnatural causes', including 197 who were shot dead, during the widespread protests. While the triggers of these violent electoral protests vary, the disputes share common reinforcing drivers. The above highlights suggest that although the Southern African region largely remains peaceful and stable, it is prone to multiple security threats. One of these threats is radicalisation and violent extremism (RVE).

Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Southern Africa

The Southern African region is not immune to the threat of RVE. South Africa and Mozambique are clear reminders of that threat. In 2015, as many as 140 [South Africans](#) (three of whom were killed in action) had been recruited by the Islamic State (ISIS) to fight in Syria. South Africans were also shocked to learn that the Islamic State (ISIS) had allegedly tried to recruit a 15-year-old girl from Cape Town to fight in Syria. ISIS' previous footprint in South Africa shows how prone Southern Africa is to RVE.

The security situation in Mozambique remains highly volatile, primarily due to the ongoing Islamist insurgency in the northern Cabo Delgado province and a nationwide threat of kidnappings. While international forces have curbed large-scale militant advances, extremist groups continue to pose a severe threat and cause massive internal displacement. They have become highly mobile and fast-moving, using [guerilla tactics](#) to evade detection. [ReliefWeb](#) numerically breaks down the situation in Cabo Delgado province (23 February to 8 March 2026) as follows:

- At least **5** political violence events (**2,338** in total since 1 October 2017);
- At least **30** total reported fatalities from political violence (**6,498** since 1 October 2017);
- At least **2** reported civilian fatalities (**2,721** since 1 October 2017);
- At least **4** political violence events involving ISM across Mozambique (**2,168** since 1 October 2017).

Despite efforts to curb violent extremism and terrorism in Mozambique, the situation remains dire and has the potential to spillover to the rest of the SADC region, especially to the country's neighbouring countries such as Zambia and Zimbabwe. Reports of gold rush in Zambia and violent miners from different nationalities raises the question whether gold proceeds from illegal mining can be used to fund RVE activities in Mozambique's troubled Cabo Delgado province, as has been the case in West African countries including [Mali](#) and Burkina Faso.

Gold 'Rush' in Zambia and the Threat of Violent Extremism

In 2025, Zambia experienced highly publicized gold rushes in regions such as Mufumbwe (North-Western Province) and Rufunsa (Lusaka Province). The discoveries attracted tens of thousands of [artisanal miners](#) seeking easy-to-access gold, but they also prompted government crackdowns and formalisation efforts to combat unregulated extraction, environmental damage, and escalating local violence. Rural sites like Kikonge and Dengwe saw more than [40,000](#) people flood the area after social media videos showed farmers easily unearthing gold near the surface.

However, in January 2026, Zambia Army Commander, Lt Gen. Zyele noted that intelligence reports indicated some small-scale miners were unlicensed, [armed](#), violent, engaged in drug trafficking and undocumented migrants from different African countries, whose activities posed a serious threat to Zambia's national security. In response, Zambia security forces deployed soldiers and police officers leading to violent and fatal clashes between miners and security forces.

Although Zambia's gold rush and insecurity in the affected areas have not been directly connected to extremist groups, weak policing could create opportunities for extremist groups from Mozambique and the DRC to exploit gold in order to fund and sustain their activities. Radicalisation of young people and communities within gold-mining zones could also be easier for such groups given their proximity to arms and other radicalising influences. Evidence from West African countries clearly shows the link between gold mining and extremist funding. Mozambique, which neighbours Zambia and is closer to the mining communities has seen the [Islamic State Mozambique \(ISM\)](#) go beyond exploiting natural

resource grievances to systematically integrate gold, rubies and graphite mining into its operational and financing strategies. In the same vein, reports have associated gold, especially in [Zimbabwe](#), with smuggling, money laundering and violence by quasi-militias. Such a situation should be prevented in Zambia, as it could lead to both a national and regional security crisis.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Zambia's gold rush exposes the country to violent extremism and terrorism due to its proximity to Mozambique, the epicenter of violent extremism in Southern Africa. Terrorist groups in Mozambique may gain access to gold deposits and use the proceeds to fund and sustain violence across the Southern African region. Armed and undocumented miners from different countries could also become easy targets for recruitment by terrorist groups in Mozambique.

Way Forward

Given the lurking threat of gold-induced RVE in Zambia and in Southern Africa more broadly, the following recommendations could be helpful:

- i. **Increased security cooperation and intelligence sharing:** countries in Southern Africa should strengthen vigilance, security cooperation and intelligence sharing, especially in the context of irregular migration. State security institutions should ensure that irregular migrants, who may later become 'illegal' small-scale miners, are documented and not armed.
- ii. **Investing in research:** the Government of the Republic of Zambia (GRZ) and other countries in the region should prioritize and fund research, especially on the link between RVE and 'illegal' gold mining. Civil society organisations, academic institutions and think tanks could play a crucial role in that respect.
- iii. **Intensifying gold mining formalisation and value addition:** the Zambian government and its counterparts in Southern Africa should issue more licenses for small-scale mining to curb the influx of 'illegal' miners. Value addition in gold and other minerals could also help reduce smuggling.
- iv. **Tackling the root causes of 'illegal mining' and RVE:** unemployment, poverty, poor governance and social exclusion force people to engage in 'illegal mining' for livelihood purposes. The same factors can also expose individuals to RVE. It is therefore crucial for governments in Southern Africa to implement policies that promote transparency, social inclusion and employment creation. Mediation and inclusive community dialogue are also essential.
- v. **Tackling illicit financial flows:** minerals-related illicit financial flows and money laundering should be tackled through strong institutional and policy frameworks. Financial intelligence gathering and sharing would be crucial in this regard.

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