



Jihadists, Rebels or Bandits: The Threat Of The Allied Democratic Forces

Suranjan Weeraratne

27 June 2017

The Allied Democratic Forces—a militant Islamist group in the Ugandan-Congolese borderland—have been depicted as a serious threat to regional security with links to transnational Jihadist groups. But how accurate is this story and what threat does this group actually pose?

Author's note: This contribution is partly based on an article published by [Weeraratne and Recker in 2016](#) and provides an updated assessment of the security threat posed by the ADF in the Ugandan/Congolese borderland.

The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), commonly perceived as a “militant Islamist group,” is a violent non-state movement operating in the Ugandan-Congolese borderland. The group has increasingly been in the spotlight and stands accused of carrying out numerous attacks since late 2014, mostly in and around the city of Beni in the northeastern province of North Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). According to data from the [Global Terrorism Database](#), the ADF carried out 80 separate attacks against civilians and government/military targets from October 2014 to December 2015, resulting in a cumulative total of 507 fatalities. Similarly, [Human Rights Watch](#) and a report published by the [UN Group of Experts on the DRC](#) estimate well over 600 fatalities in attacks attributed to the group over the last two years.

The Ugandan regime and their Congolese counterparts have been quick to highlight the growing security menace presented by the ADF and often portray the group as a militant Jihadist movement with a litany of ties to transnational

Latest

[An Update on the Security Policy Change Programme](#)

[Chances for Peace in the Third Decade](#)

[A Story of ORG: Oliver Ramsbotham](#)

[A Story of ORG: Gabrielle Rifkind](#)

Most read

[The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities](#)

[Making Bad Economies: The Poverty of Mexican Drug](#)

Jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram. However, many analysts caution that the deteriorating security situation in Beni is not entirely due to the ADF and present mounting evidence of complicity of several other actors in the violence. Furthermore, the dogged portrayal of the ADF as a predominantly Islamist militant group with ties to transnational terrorists is a **simplistic and overly opportunistic narrative** that overplays the role of religion and mischaracterizes the varied objectives of the many disparate elements that increasingly constitute the ADF.

Origins and evolution of the ADF

The ideological roots of the ADF grew in the 1980s in central Uganda as a response to the Museveni government's **perceived discrimination** towards its Muslim population. The precursor to the ADF was the **Ugandan Mujahidin Freedom Fighters**, an armed group instituted by The Islamic Salaf Foundation and composed mainly of members of the puritanical Tabliq sect. A controversial decision by the Ugandan Supreme Court in 1992 to rule in favor of a rival Muslim group further radicalized the Tabliq movement. They retaliated violently, fled to western Uganda and engaged the Ugandan military in sustained fighting. After a series of defeats, the Tabliq retreated to the DRC, from where they established the ADF in 1996, under the leadership of Jamil Mukulu.

Despite its central Ugandan origins, the ADF's principal theatre of operations has long been the Rwenzori mountainous region straddling western Uganda and the eastern DRC. This choice of location as a base was influenced by the region's celebrated history of contentious mobilization, weak central government control on either side of the border, similar cross-cultural traits and ample opportunities for collusion with numerous other militant groups embroiled in the larger Congolese war. One such group was the National

Cartels

ORG's Vision

Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres

Liberation Movement for Uganda (NALU), which fled to the DRC following military defeat by the Ugandan army. In 1996, NALU formed an association with the ADF in the city of Beni. Several **common denominators** united the two groups; distrust of the Museveni regime, their presence on Congolese soil and external support provided by the Sudanese and Congolese governments. The ADF-NALU partnership carried out numerous attacks in the 1990s; conservative **estimates indicate** that over 1,000 people were killed and over 100,000 displaced from 1996-2001. Prominent targets included police stations, administrative buildings and schools.

The Ugandan military deployed troops across the border in eastern Congo in 1998 to **combat the ADF threat**. Multiple leaders were killed or captured and the movement was largely destabilized by 2002. The rebels retreated deeper into the DRC and the departure of the Ugandan troops in 2003 allowed the ADF-NALU alliance to regroup through vigorous recruitment. The next few years were punctuated by intermittent attacks by the ADF and military offensives launched by the Ugandan army, Congolese army and the UN Mission in the DRC. In 2007, the ADF lost its NALU component as the latter surrendered and acquiesced to a **political settlement** with the Ugandan government.

Recent escalation in violence

After a period of relative dormancy from 2007 to 2013 that was **interspersed with occasional bouts of violence**, there has been a significant resurgence in ADF activity over the last two years. A series of devastating attacks on civilians in the eastern Congo since October 2014 has left over 600 dead, tens of thousands displaced and many of the attacks have been marked by **high levels of brutality**. Survivors and witnesses have spoken of kidnappings, rape, torture, abduction of children and rampant destruction of property. Furthermore, the

ADF was accused of [killing Muslim clergy members](#) in Uganda in early 2015. Also contributing to the escalation in violence has been Operation Sukola I, launched against the ADF by the Congolese army and the UN Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO), in January 2014. Continued military operations have seen the ADF suffer several battlefield defeats and the militants have been forced to flee into the forest. It is reported that the [ADF fragmented into smaller groups](#) to improve their chances of avoiding detection from the advancing Congolese forces. Many senior commanders are still missing; however, after a protracted search, ADF's leader, Mukulu, was arrested by the Tanzanian police in Dares Salaam in April 2015 and later extradited to Uganda where he was convicted on charges of [treason](#).

There is little doubt that the ADF has been responsible for [at least some of the attacks](#) in and around Beni. While the ADF did carry out intermittent acts of violence against civilians, the arrangement between the ADF and the local community, at least until 2013, was one of [“cooperative \(if oftentimes\) reluctant coexistence.”](#) In general, the ADF respected the “traditional hierarchy of the host communities” and in 2011, was estimated to command “the popular support of nearly [half of the population](#) of Beni territory.” The increasing focus on civilian targets since 2014 may partly be due to the fact that as the military offensive against the ADF intensified, the group carried out numerous reprisal attacks on civilian informants alleged to have collaborated with the UN and Congolese forces. As one scholar noted, “people are being [punished and killed when they don't want to collaborate](#)” with the ADF.

While the Ugandan and Congolese governments have portrayed the ADF as the primary culprit ([for a variety of instrumental motivations](#)), it is increasingly apparent that [other actors have been involved in the massacres](#) in North Kivu,

including members of the Congolese armed forces, other rebel groups and communal militia. Moreover, as the ADF fragmented into smaller units, the absence of a centralized chain of command resulted in different groups pursuing diverse agendas. Some ADF factions, accused of violence, formed ties with local militia and outside elements who were then also involved in some of the killings. Indeed, interviews with survivors and witnesses suggest that many attackers *spoke languages* not normally used in this part of the Congo. Further, the breadth and the scope of violence as well as the nature of weapons used are suggestive of the involvement of multiple armed actors. *The UN Group* also concluded that some Congolese army officers played an overt and covert role in support of certain incidents of violence. While the precise underlying triggers for the violence are not clear, there is evidence that *localized conflicts over land and power struggles over leadership* contributed to at least some of the attacks. The dominant narrative of blaming the ADF is widely entrenched and largely unquestioned and has hampered efforts to dig deeper into the causes of the violence.

The “Islamist” character of the ADF

The ADF are commonly depicted as an Islamist terrorist organization with a complex array of ties to regional jihadist groups. Consequently, it is seen to pose an existential security threat to the region. The Ugandan government in particular has *aggressively peddled* this misleading narrative. It is true that ADF’s inception can be traced to a core group of puritanical Muslims from the Salaf Tabliq movement. ADF’s erstwhile leader, Jamil Mukulu, is a strong adherent of Salafi Islam and has indicated his desire to overthrow the government of Uganda and establish an Islamist state based on Sharia law. The ADF has distributed incendiary *tape recordings* of Mukulu that urge

followers to wage a holy Jihad, carried out forcible conversions of non-Muslims, conducted Islamic instruction in training camps and meted punishments in accordance with Islamic law.

However, Scorgie-Porter argues forcefully that an exclusive focus on the religious aspect provides a limited account of the group's motives and neglects other important strands to the development of the ADF. Some suggest that the group was mainly driven by a political agenda of removing the Museveni regime and used its Islamic identity instrumentally. A former ADF militant contended that "the agenda of the ADF was purely political...the ADF adapted the grievances of Islam in order to appeal to these people. Islam was a ticket, so the leaders disguised their political motives in religion." Titeca and Vlassenroot resist reducing the role of Islam to instrumental usage, but suggest that the religious reference co-existed with other agendas such as regime change. They describe the ADF as a "rebellion without cause," and contend that the movement's agendas have changed over time. For instance, during recent peace talks, the principal ADF demands revolved around socioeconomic issues such as reintegration of demobilized soldiers rather than effecting regime change or Islamic governance.

ADF is often described as a multi-layered entity comprising several different elements with varying agendas. While the Tabliq network served a vital role in recruitment and was largely responsible for securing funds from Islamic charities and foreign countries during the group's formative stages, ADF is considerably less reliant on the Tabliq now. Recruitment in the ADF has also been heavily contingent on non-religious factors such as the exploitation of deep-seated perceptions of marginalization, poverty and the lack of alternative opportunity in the Rwenzori borderland. ADF's economic embeddedness in the

local community provides the group with its primary avenues of funding and material support at present and the group's financial contributions from Islamic sources have considerably dwindled over time. Due to the group's tendency to seize resources from local populations, some have gone as far as to describe the group as little more than "bandits".

Conclusion

The Ugandan government has consistently attempted to link the ADF to global Jihadi groups and, in turn, depict the group as a serious threat to regional security. Some sources do suggest that elements of Al-Qaeda had sporadic ties with the ADF in the 1990s and provided some financial assistance. Reportedly, Osama bin Laden even met Mukulu while they were both in Sudan in the early 1990s. Similarly, there has been occasional correspondence with Al-Shabaab operatives. However, such ties have been infrequent and there is little concrete evidence that regional Jihadists have any meaningful ties with the ADF. Indeed, Weeraratne and Recker argue that ideological incongruence, lack of salience to the local community and the fear of attracting more attention from counter-terrorism operatives reduce the likelihood of the ADF forming significant connections with transnational Islamists. Moreover, given that less than 10% of the population is Muslim in ADF's chief operating environment in eastern Congo (a region that has shown very few signs of radicalization), it is unclear how foreign Jihadists would benefit from a union with the ADF.

Museveni's regime has a vested interest in embellishing real or perceived links between the ADF and foreign Jihadists. First, it allows the regime to deflect attention from its authoritarian tendencies and project itself as a key ally in the US led war on terror; in turn, making it easier to attract American military and diplomatic assistance. Second, exaggerating links also justifies the

maintenance of high levels of military spending and gives the government a convenient alibi to continue raids on the eastern DRC where it has a range of interests.

In summation, the portrayal of the ADF as a mainly Jihadist group is incomplete at best and deceptive at worst. It is clear that the ADF is not a monolithic organization with a dominant preference for executing a puritanical Islamist agenda. The group has moved away from its earlier stated ambition of overthrowing the Museveni regime and replacing it with Islamist governance. The present day ADF constitutes a motely array of disparate interests, many of which are linked to economic and local political issues. To be clear, this is not to say that the ADF does not pose a security threat. As discussed earlier, the group was responsible for several of the attacks over the last two years. However, at least for the foreseeable future, ADF's threat is likely to be confined to the [rural areas in Beni](#). Hence, the group is unlikely to pose an existential security threat to either the Ugandan government or their Congolese counterparts.

Image of UN vehicle ambushed by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). Image credit: [UN Photo/Flickr](#).

Suranjan Weeraratne is a faculty member in the Department of Political Science, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His research focuses on various aspects of terrorism, including examining linkages between transnational militant groups and studying patterns of terrorist funding.

Share this page



Contact

Unit 503
101 Clerkenwell Road London
EC1R 5BX
Charity no. 299436
Company no. 2260840

Email us

020 3559 6745

Follow us



Useful links

- [Login](#)
- [Contact us](#)
- [Sitemap](#)
- [Accessibility](#)
- [Terms & Conditions](#)
- [Privacy policy](#)