



The Resilience of the Lord's Resistance Army

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The Lord's Resistance Army is seriously depleted as a fighting force, but it still continues to exist as an armed group. This resilience is driven by several key factors.

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has carved a path of violence and disorder throughout East and Central Africa for nearly three decades. Led by Joseph Kony, the rebel group has [directly and indirectly](#) killed more than 100,000 civilians, has abducted upwards of 66,000 children, and has displaced hundreds of thousands more across five countries. While formidable in the past, the LRA is now a threadbare non-threat from a conventional military standpoint. With the group's numbers at less than 200 (down from at least 5,000 active fighters in the 1990s), attacks and abductions are steadily trending downwards.

Yet the LRA has also proven to be distinctly resilient, surviving as a collection of semi-autonomous units in sparsely populated peripheries that put up no resistance. Nevertheless, LRA fighters still pose a tangible threat as they loot and harass civilians, while Kony evades detection in Sudan's *Kafia Kinji* region. While many observers describe the group's current behavior as "survival mode," its complex history shows this to be its modal pattern of organization and behavior based on an on-going ability of the group to adapt to shifts in its politico-military environment through distinct organizational endowments and resource acquisition strategies.

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Most of the prevailing literature on the LRA has provided key insights into its history, organization, and behavior. However, the research that has focused on the group's motives and the drivers of its violence has not addressed the distinct question of its resilience. The LRA's resilience comes down to its organizational structure and shrewd resource strategies that have developed within autonomous bush sanctuaries and vis-à-vis the group's wider political environment.

Its organizational structure is based on a distinct combination of two factors. First, LRA recruitment and retention strategies relied on Acholi beliefs in spiritual and cultural symbols, such as viewing Kony as a medium for the "holy spirit," and the common use of rituals. Such beliefs and practices, undergirded by violence, helped socialize Acholi youths familiar with them into fighters. Second, a more traditional military hierarchy was built around an initial committed core, which formed the basis for a flexible, decentralized structure that, while slowly degrading over time, has remained remarkably sturdy. In addition, the group's resource acquisition strategies have adapted to periods of both abundance and scarcity. This configuration of factors has remained more-or-less intact for more than three decades as the LRA has interacted with regional geopolitical shifts and in the face of multiple challenges of maintaining an insurgency.

LRA Resilience Over Three Phases

The LRA grew directly from a homegrown [Ugandan People's Democratic Army \(UPDA\)](#), made up from the dominant Acholi faction of the national army overthrown by the National Resistance Army (NRA) in 1986. Led by [Bazilio Olara-Okello](#) and other military strongmen, the UPDA rebellion ended with the Pece Peace Accord of 1988. Yet senior officer [Odong Latek](#) and intransigent

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junior officers from the former military remained in the bush fearing criminal punishment. While this rump of the UPDA retained a military structure, it began to rely on alternative strategies for mobilization. During the UPDA's war, head of the Holy Spirit Movement [Alice Lakwena](#) and [Joseph Kony](#) developed factions that attracted fighters with an appeal to the salvation for the Acholi people through military victory, using unorthodox military practices (e.g. believing shea butter would make fighters bullet-proof and that rocks would explode as hand grenades). Following the 1987 defeat of Lakwena's Holy Spirit Mobile Forces (HSMF), Kony's faction became dominant. By late 1988, Latek's more conventional force merged with the sizable "cosmological" faction controlled by Kony, signaling the rise of his absolutist vision of Acholi society that sought to purify through violence anyone deemed government loyalists. This vision, which drew heavily on elements of elements of Acholi spiritual identity, quickly became an organizing principle and a source of resilience.

With Latek killed in 1989, Kony asserted authority, rebranding the rebellion several times until it became the LRA in September 1993. Here the group established its organizational structure, with "Control Altar" directing its operational brigades – named Gilva, Sinia, Trinkle, and Stockree – which remained intact for years and adapted to changes in manpower and resource availability. Yet the decline of the LRA's first phase began as the Ugandan state expanded into northern Uganda. The counterinsurgency campaign Operation North weakened the LRA while militarizing Acholiland. The government also expanded the Resistance Council (RC) administrative system while recruiting Local Defence Units (LDUs) as the RC's coercive arm. However, when military action failed to eliminate the group, peace talks began in late 1993. These talks broke down in early 1994 amidst boycotts and accusations of dishonesty. Tired of the LRA's mounting demands, President Museveni gave the group

seven days to surrender or face a military solution. Meanwhile, Kony had used the talks to conceal clandestine negotiations with Sudanese intelligence. Following Museveni's ultimatum, the LRA withdrew into southern Sudanese garrison towns for reorganization and training. By February 18th 1994, the group re-emerged heavily armed and newly equipped.

Thus began the LRA's second phase in the mid-1990s when it became part of a proxy war as the Sudanese government provided it with weapons and military training to fight the Sudan People's Liberation Army and territorial sanctuaries from which to attack Uganda. The LRA's experience in southern Sudan consolidated the group's structure, hardened its fighters (largely abducted Acholi youth as young as 12), and taught them how to survive in borderlands for years of operations that kept northern Uganda in almost permanent humanitarian crisis. Yet, while Sudanese support was a decisive factor in the LRA's military strength and the intensification of the conflict, it was not always seamless. Kony's priorities in Uganda often put him at odds with Khartoum and this led to periodic ruptures in the LRA's resource pipeline, and the group was often expected to fend for itself in terms of day-to-day survival. As such, the LRA developed a diversified strategy of resource acquisition – maintaining military stockpiles while creating self-sustaining agrarian communities. These experiences with intermittent access to resources promoted the LRA's self-sufficiency and resilience.

The decline of this period began with the December [1999 Nairobi Agreement](#), which committed Sudan and Uganda to end their proxy war. Attacks in northern Uganda declined, but the LRA remained in southern Sudan. At times, the group received Sudanese support. But Khartoum signaled its commitment to push the LRA from its territory in early 2002 when it authorized the UPDF to launch

Operation Iron Fist, designed to dislodge the LRA from its Sudanese bush camps. While Iron Fist delivered some tactical successes, it did not deliver the desired knockout blow to the LRA. Instead, in 2003 the group re-entered Uganda and started a fresh conflict characterized by high profile violence and a humanitarian crisis that the Ugandan government largely outsourced to international aid agencies. The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) ended the civil war in Sudan and ejected the LRA while a revitalized UPDF blocked the group's re-entry into Uganda.

From 2005, the LRA shifted into its third phase, best described as roving banditry. Facing military threats and the geopolitical closure of northern Uganda and southern Sudan, the group shifted to DRC's [Garamba National Park](#). For the following two years, the Juba peace process allowed the LRA to regroup while coalescing more tightly around Kony's security. During this period, there was a relative lull in LRA violence, limited abductions, and the suspension in abductee training. Yet while support from Khartoum had ended, the LRA's military capacity remained intact. Juba ultimately collapsed in 2008 due to ceasefire violations, walkouts, the LRA's refusal to gather in the assembly areas, and Kony's repeated failure to sign the accord's final documents of the accord. The LRA soon resumed violence in DRC as the UPDF led Operation Lightning Thunder against Kony's Garamba hideout. Intelligence failures led to an unsuccessful operation, and UPDF ground troops arrived at an empty camp. Shortly thereafter, the LRA unleashed a series of reprisal killings against civilians.

The LRA's sanctuaries in DRC, CAR, and Sudan have provided permissive conditions for survival – few state institutions and a new set of resources. As such, the group has since engaged its resilience strategies in two key ways.

First, the LRA has managed to maintain its hierarchy despite the outflow senior commanders, extended periods of geographical separation, and sporadic communication between units, which are expected to act independently and fend for themselves. Although this organizational structure is decentralized, core members still carry out Kony's long-term strategic orders while maintaining an explicit LRA identity. Second, while looting remains a way of obtaining resources, the LRA has become a small player in regional illicit networks in natural resources, particularly ivory, diamonds, and gold. The group's renewed informal relationship with Sudanese officials in the *Kafia Kinji* border region shelters Kony and his inner retinue and provides markets for looted items and commodities.

Conclusion

In sum, the LRA has survived by virtue of its organizational cohesion, resource use, and the ability to read its political terrain in order to exploit regions without state structures. However, such strategies may not be sufficient to sustain the LRA indefinitely. The Ugandan-led Regional Task Force (RTF) has killed and captured senior commanders from the battlefield and increased fighter defections. To be sure, the hunt for the LRA has been hamstrung by logistical and political difficulties. Above all, RTF operations are currently at risk of losing their logistical support from the U.S. Special Forces, which have larger consequences for regional peace and security in central and eastern Africa.

Image of Uganda soldiers part of the 2008–09 Garamba offensive against LRA. Image credit: [Sgt. Jeremy T. Lock/Wikimedia](#).

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