

THE EVOLUTION OF THE TERRORIST THREAT IN DR CONGO:

GROWING NUMBERS OF IS-CLAIMED ATTACKS ON CONGOLESE TERRITORY SEEM TO SUGGEST A CONNECTION WITH LOCAL ARMED GROUPS

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INTRODUCTION

The military defeat on the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq in November 2017 may let us think that the group have been reduced to nothing, losing all its power. It is quite the contrary: after losing its remaining lands in Syria and Iraq, IS has seemed to double its efforts to spread the caliphate across the world. It continues to hold off Syrian Democratic Forces operations, and its affiliates around the world continue to carry out attacks and attract foreign fighters. Its often-cited statement 'Baqiya wa tatamadad', calls for remaining and expanding, and not just surviving. **It has moved from being a parastatal entity to a diffuse insurgency movement with presence, attacks and claims across the world, from Nicaragua to South Korea.**

Now, alongside militias, bandits and diverse violent groups, the IS has showed its presence in Africa, and most particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo. As if the presence of the international insurgency movement in Africa was not enough, in a continent affected by great violence between tribes, militias, bandits and now terrorists, IS has claimed its province in a territory already occupied by a dangerous group, such as the ADF. The Islamic State's presence in this specific territory raises question of a possible collaboration between the 2 groups.

In addition to reasserting its diffuse expansion, the establishment of a new IS province rearranged the dynamics of violence in the area, especially if the group is coordinating with ADF.

INCREASED ISLAMIC STATE PRESENCE IN DRC

The first attack claimed by the Islamic State (IS) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) occurred on Thursday, April 18 in Bovata, near the town of Beni in North Kivu. On this occasion, IS declared the “Central Africa Province” of the Caliphate after 2 Congolese soldiers and a civilian were killed in a gunfight. Nevertheless, a Central African province had already been mentioned by Al-Baghdadi in August 2018, which means that **it is possible that the Islamic State in Central Africa Province (ISCAP) had existed for almost a year before IS publicly attributed an attack to this branch.** This would have left them enough time to gather fighters, organize and plan attacks before officially revealing their existence to the world.

Since then, IS claimed several attacks in the the Central Africa Province.

- On April 25, they claimed to have killed 3 and injured one soldier on an attack several days before.
- On May 5, IS released images of equipment it said had been seized from the Congolese military in an attack in Kalyanjoki, near Butembo, in north Kivu.
- On May 8, IS said ISCAP fighters on May 7 clashed with Congolese soldiers, “injuring a number of them” while others fled.” It said “various munitions” had been captured.
- On May 30, IS claimed its ISCAP fighters attacked Congolese military bases in Mavivin, North-Kivu, although the Congolese army said more than 20 Allied Democratic Forces fighters had been killed in nearby Ngite. A picture showing Islamic State fighters in an alleged camp in the DRC’s North Kivu region was also released alongside Amaq’s summary.
- On June 5, IS claimed the attack that killed 13 civilians and injures 13 others in Beni region, North Kivu and on June 6, IS release pictures of the Eid-al-Fitr celebrations in their different branches, including DRC.
- On June 17, IS claimed responsibility for an attack against the Congolese army, killing several soldiers and seizing weapons in Butembo region, North Kivu.
- On June 26, IS claims an IED attack on Army barracks in Beni, North-Kivu, killing 9 soldiers, while Congolese army spokesman confirms clashes with ADF rebels.
- On June 28, ISCAP claimed that 2 soldiers of the Congolese Army had been killed in an attack against barracks in Oicha, North Kivu.
- With an official statement released via the Islamic State official media agency, Amaq, on July 10, ISCAP claimed killing 3 Congolese soldiers and injuring several others on July 9 in Beni, North Kivu and released a photo report of the ambush.
- On July 12, ISCAP claimed to have carried out an IED attack that killed 8 Congolese soldiers in the Beni area, North Kivu, and on July 14 released a new video showing the dead bodies of Congolese soldiers in Beni, North Kivu.
- On July 14, ISCAP released a video of dead bodies of soldiers the Congolese army in Beni territory. With 2 different statements released on July 20 and 21, the IS also claimed killing 3 Congolese soldiers on 2 different days in Beni area.

- Additionally, ISCAP published its first video on July 24, as a part of IS' series "And The Best Outcome Is For The Pious," in which fighters are pledging their allegiance to the IS. On this video, many of the soldiers presented are children, some very young, and there even seem to be a foreign fighter from the ADF.

Most recently, local sources reported that ISCAP fighters killed at least 5 civilians and kidnapped 20 others while invading the village of Ndama, in the chiefdom of Watalinga in Beni, North Kivu.

Since the first statement, it seems like IS has been "catching up" as attacks claimed by ISCAP have become more and more frequent. **According to data compiled by ESISC, the Islamic State has now claimed at least 15 attacks in the DRC since April 18, all of them located in DRC's North Kivu region**, an area that has been afflicted with violence by a multitude of armed groups for over 2 decades. It is highly unlikely that the location was left to chance, which suggest links between armed groups.

A STRONG ADF PRESENCE

Another violent group is very present in DRC: The Allied Democratic Forces. The ADF is an originally Ugandan armed group founded in 1995 by gathering opposition movements to president Yoweri Museveni. They acted as a merger between Uganda's Tabliq, the armed Muslim movement, and remnants of the secular National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (NALU), formerly the secessionist Rwenzururu movement. In 1995 the military overran the Tabliq bases, forcing them to flee to DRC, where they linked up with NALU to form the ADF, including in the process the West Nile Bank Front fighters, a group loyal to the former Ugandan dictator and backed by the Sudanese and Congolese governments.

Although ADF has always had Islamist roots, through time it has taken many faces, ranging from Salafi-Jihadism to secular nationalism, ethno-nationalism and secessionism, each with a different purpose and aiming at different audiences. **Today, the group seems to have taken a very Islamist position and can count on, according to UN estimates, on around 500/600 fighters.**

The group is mainly active in North Kivu thanks to opportunistic links with local and foreign militia and bandits. The province of North Kivu also provides them with a rugged terrain, making it difficult to track and engage them militarily. Unlike in Uganda, where they were chased out, they managed to establish "state-like" structures in DRC such as prisons, schools, banks, health centres and economic ties with other groups. **They are therefore firmly established in North Kivu, also thanks to the weak state institutions allowing for this state-like apparatus, which could explain IS's interest in the region.**

As opposed to other armed groups and particularly IS, the ADF don't have a press network or an official media agency on which they claim their attacks. Their exactions therefore remain mostly unknown to the international population, apart from some videos published by fighters on private social media channels such as Facebook. Given its very secretive nature, little is known about the internal dynamics of ADF and which identity is dominant. This can be explained by the absence of a public spokesperson and official media and the fact that only few deserters are known, which makes it difficult to be certain of the extent of their network and motivations. Additionally, their recruitment in several neighbouring countries contribute in blurring the purpose of the group.

Since 2014 ADF has characterized its modus operandi by carrying out a series of brutal massacres, kidnappings and lootings in eastern Congo, and attacks against UN or Congolese military targets.

THE LINKS BETWEEN ADF AND IS

According to some experts, the newly established ISCAP would originate from defectors of ADF, for whom the ADF would not be Islamic and/or powerful enough, while others claim that ISCAP is helping ADF carry out attacks in exchange for presence on their land. It remains unclear whether ISCAP is a whole new group, or if ADF has become part of IS, with the same purpose of spreading the Caliphate.

To some authors, the creation of an Islamic state in Africa may not be the primary goal but one of many others, and ADF would be using IS solely as a ticket to more power. Indeed, an ex-combatant interview in 2002 confirmed the latter hypothesis and the purely political agenda of ADF, for whom Islam would be only a ticket to power, so the leaders would disguise their political motive in religion to reach their goal(s). To others, Islamist ideology has indeed taken a more central position, which could explain the connection between the 2 groups: ADF gains power, international recognition, weapons and fighters, and IS wins a whole new province and fighters on which to exercise its power and assert its dominance.

Several other evidences suggest an alignment between ADF and the Islamic state.

Researchers from the Congo Research Group have found that the ADF has made several overtures to the Islamic State in recent years, although shifts towards Sharia law have been reported since the early 2000s. **There are signs that the group is increasingly adopting militant Islamism as an identity.** This includes the rebranding operation carried out in 2012 which resulted in changing the name to “Madinat al Tawhid wal Muwahedeen,” or the City of Monotheism and Monotheists (MTM), placing a strong emphasis on a radical, violent interpretation of the Quran, threatening to kill all unbelievers.

The group has also adopted a new flag, very similar to IS’s, and started to produce new violent imagery more aligned to jihadist organizations.

Moreover, IS material and books were found within the ADF/MTM ranks: a book produced by the publicity branch of IS was found on a dead ADF combatant in Beni in February 2018.

However, the first signs of this shift have been observed as early as 2007 in the ADF. In 2014, UN experts even noted the presence of Arabic-speaking instructors and fighters among the ADF. Similarly, some of the few ADF defectors interviewed confirmed that the group had been attempting to align with jihadist groups to increase their strength. Some reported the strict discipline in the camp, that all members were forced to pray 5 times a day and that Islamic education was mandatory for fighters’ children.

As a matter of a fact, **aligning with IS, which has resources and some 15,000 foreign fighters scattered across the globe would be very profitable for a group such as ADF.**

A link between the 2 organisations is also suggested by a shift in the operational modus operandi of ADF. Experts have observed that prior to June 2019, ADF had never used explosives, which are very commonly used by IS. It could be that ADF is simply shifting practices, seeking to gain international recognition, but it is also probable that they have become part of IS propaganda efforts, in which case IS acts as the invisible hand providing weapons, resources and new tactical approaches.

To support this, **the arrest in July 2018 of a Kenyan IS financial facilitator revealed the first concrete linkage between ADF and other jihadi groups via bank transactions.** Waleed Ahmed Zein was arrested on charges of financing terrorism and sanctioned in September 2018 by the US government. According to Kenyan police sources, Zein had conveyed the allocation of resources for a total of \$150,000 to different groups - including ADF - through a network linked to the Islamic State.

In addition, the ADF appear to be slowly becoming more interested in broadcasting their messages to a wider, East African audience: they have published several videos on their website, in which other languages are spoken such as Luganda, Congolese Swahili, French, and Kinyarwanda. They seem to be attempting to present themselves within a broader setting of radical jihadi groups, with the presence of Burundi fighters, whose accent suggest they come from the Muslim part of Burundi, and Arab-speaking Tanzanian – Ahmad “Jundi” Mahamood – who was featured on a video widely shared on social media.

Yet, the links between the IS and ADF are still to be verified.

IS claims haven't been verified and the ambiguity surrounding the actions of both groups makes the responsibility of attacks difficult to ascertain. For instance, IS claimed an attack that was previously attributed to ADF by the Army, and some IS claims are vague as to the location and modus operandi. Additionally, the presence of many other bandits and militias, such as the **Mai-Mai**, also operating in the area, contributes to the unclearness of the situation in North Kivu. It must also be noted that extrajudicial executions by the Congolese armed force are very common; the army would therefore be eager to accuse IS, the ADF or other bandits or militia of their own actions. Indeed, the UN reported that nearly 7000 have been victims of summary and extrajudicial executions from January to June 2019 in DRC, a third of which were committed by security forces.

Thus, it remains unclear how actually is the ADF in touch with IS networks, and what triggered this intense shift towards radical Islamism in ADF.

This shift could have been caused by the **arrest of ADF leader Jamil Mukulu in 2015, who was replaced by Musa Baluku at the head of ADF**. Baluku had to unite a fragmented group that had suffered casualties and was geographically disjointed due to the 2014 “Sukola I” operation by DRC forces aimed at defeating the group. Therefore, Baluku may have placed an emphasis on extremist Islamic ideology to unify the remaining forces and help assert control by aligning themselves on other Islamic movements and strengthen the group. The loss of NALU, ADF's secular secessionist ally, may have open the gates for Islamic extremism.

AN INCREASED THREAT

ADF has been seen as a very resilient group that has managed to strongly implant and live in a land difficult to access, where they are hardly challenged. This may be why IS has found an interest in forming an ally in this area that provides a good hideout for terrorists. Indeed, lands in north-Kivu are hard to access and ADF are well implanted, with network forming a sort of state-like apparatus. Moreover, the aim of IS is to spread the Caliphate, which they are succeeding at, with the creation of a new province in Central Africa.

Therefore, the shift in ADF's narrative and the interests of both camps suggest that an alliance between the 2 would be very profitable as previously underlined in this briefing. Weak states and poverty are laying grounds for terrorists, and money transfers suggest that IS is actually helping ADF by providing them with resources and new tactics.

Indeed, an alliance would allow IS to enlarge its presence and ADF to gain international recognition. If the ADF, who has for a long time carried out attacks with guns and machetes, gains the possibility to have new, more destructive weapons, there is no doubt that more violent attacks will ensue. And **if the Caliphate continues spreading its ideology at its actual pace and is helped in any sort of way by the ADF, the risk of a consistent deterioration of the security scenario in the region is likely with the possibility of spilling over in neighbouring countries.**

This poses a growing threat as IS has the advantage of having resources and ties in many countries in the world, especially those with weak institution and scarce control of their remote geographical territories, as in Africa. Moreover, IS had proved to be very skilled at recruiting new fighters with accessible narrative, as evidenced by the large network of foreign fighters, in which almost every country in the world is represented.

Considering the situation, regional and international powers should monitor the situation in Central Africa closely in order to understand the relationship and links between Islamic State and local armed groups.

Weak institutions characterising DRC and many neighbouring countries provide great conditions for radical Islamism to gather and expand, especially in a such central area, in terms of geographic relevance. These conditions could lead to ISCAP gathering all violent groups under the single purpose of spreading the Islamic State, creating an army bigger and more powerful than States want to believe and therefore deteriorating consistently an already critical security situation.

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