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The Allied Democratic Forces, an Islamic State Affiliate in the Democratic Republic of Congo

The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) is an armed group primarily active in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). ADF combatants primarily are from Uganda and DRC, with some reportedly from other countries in East Africa. The Islamic State (IS, aka ISIL/ISIS) recognized a pledge of allegiance by ADF leadership in 2019, and the State Department designated the group as an IS affiliate and Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in 2021. The ADF has drawn interest from Congress due to its IS affiliation and for the threat it poses to long-running U.S. efforts to help stabilize DRC, where overlapping conflicts have caused one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

The ADF has reportedly expanded its areas of operation, capacity, and lethality since 2021, despite Congolese and Ugandan military operations. DRC's government declared martial law in ADF-affected areas in May 2021, and in late 2021, Uganda deployed troops to counter the ADF inside DRC after a string of attacks within Uganda. Since mid-2022, a surge in activity by another DRC-based armed group, the March 23 Movement (M23), has led some DRC troops and U.N. peacekeeping forces to withdraw from ADF-affected areas, deepening a security vacuum.

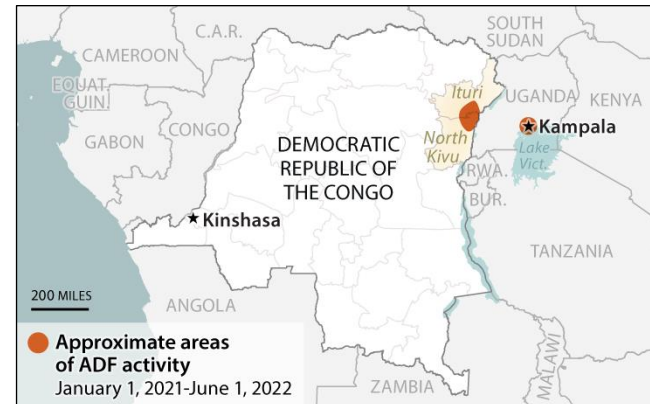
Researchers debate the nature and significance of the ADF's IS ties, amid ambiguity about the ADF's size, structure, and aims. The U.S.-based Congo Research Group and U.N. sanctions investigators for DRC have reported that other armed groups or members of DRC's military may be responsible for some attacks attributed to the ADF or claimed by IS global media on the ADF's behalf.

Origins. The ADF-National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (ADF-NALU) was formed in 1995 as a merger of two Ugandan rebel movements that had fled to DRC (then Zaire) under Ugandan military pressure. The governments of Zaire and Sudan, then at odds with Uganda, reportedly provided backing. Under leader Jamil Mukulu, a member of Tablighi Jamaat (a global Sunni Muslim revivalist movement), the ADF-NALU rebranded itself as Islamist and recruited among Ugandan Muslims. The group also began to recruit in DRC (at times forcibly), and forged ties with local civilians, soldiers, and rebels via marriage, trade, and alliances. The NALU component eventually disbanded. The ADF grew more active in DRC in the early 2010s, and was implicated in large civilian massacres starting in 2014.

Leadership. In 2014, joint U.N.-DRC military operations splintered the ADF. Leader Mukulu was arrested in Tanzania in 2015 and extradited to Uganda. His successor, Seka Musa Baluku, likewise a Ugandan national, has pursued IS affiliation, advocated Islamic rule in DRC, and overseen an apparent growth in ADF capacity. (Muslims

reportedly comprise between 2% and 5% of DRC's total population.) Rival, less capable factions reportedly endure.

Figure 1. Approximate Areas of ADF Activity



Source: CRS graphic based on Kivu Security Tracker data. Attempted attacks were also reported in Rwanda.

Impact. The ADF has reportedly killed thousands of civilians and hundreds of soldiers in DRC since 2014, and the conflict has displaced tens to hundreds of thousands of people. (Overall, about 6 million people were internally displaced in DRC as of late 2021, one of the world's largest tolls; about a million more Congolese were refugees or asylum-seekers in nearby countries.) According to a tally by the U.N. peacekeeping operation in DRC (MONUSCO), the ADF killed over 1,300 civilians in 2021, nearly 50% more than in 2020. U.N. officials have attributed possible crimes against humanity and war crimes to the ADF, including civilian killings, abductions, and use of child soldiers. The ADF also has been implicated in a string of prison breaks. Security threats, among other factors, impeded efforts to contain a large Ebola outbreak in North Kivu and Ituri in 2018-2020. State security forces have allegedly committed abuses, including extrajudicial killings and sexual violence, during counter-ADF operations.

After seeming to be weakened and divided by military operations in the mid-2010s, the ADF appeared to rebound around 2017. An ADF assault on a MONUSCO outpost in 2017 was one of the deadliest attacks ever on U.N. peacekeepers, killing 15 Tanzanian soldiers and wounding dozens. Since 2019, when DRC launched a new military offensive, the ADF has expanded north into Ituri from its longtime strongholds in North Kivu (Figure 1), and has increasingly used improvised explosive devices (IEDs). In April 2022, DRC officials stated that they suspected the ADF in a suicide bombing outside Goma, a large city and hub for peacekeeping and aid operations; if confirmed, this would be the group's first attack in the Goma area.

After years of not operating openly within Uganda, the ADF reportedly carried out a string of attacks in the country in late 2021, including simultaneous suicide bombings in Kampala that killed several people and wounded dozens. The Islamic State claimed the suicide attacks and several smaller bombings that preceded them. Also in 2021, authorities in Rwanda announced that they had disrupted an ADF plot to carry out urban IED attacks there.

Potential Issues for Congress

Nature and Implications of IS Affiliation. Members of Congress continue to weigh the significance of, and possible responses to, IS cultivation of local affiliates in Africa and beyond, in the context of congressional authorization, funding, and oversight of U.S. counter-terrorism and regional stabilization efforts. The Islamic State has recognized the ADF as an affiliate and claimed many of the attacks attributed to the group. In 2021, U.N. global terrorism monitors relayed reports that IS “operatives” in DRC had benefitted from “trainers, tactical strategists and financial support remitted from the ISIL core through ISIL networks and enablers in Somalia and other East African countries.” The U.S. Treasury Department has sanctioned persons in South Africa and Kenya who allegedly facilitated IS financial support for the ADF.

U.N. sanctions investigators focused on DRC, however, asserted as of mid-2022 that they had been unable to confirm “direct” IS support or “command and control” over the ADF, although they described growing communications. Researchers with George Washington University’s Program on Extremism assessed in 2021 that although command and control was unlikely, ADF propaganda reflected growing IS “influence”; the researchers asserted that the ADF had benefitted from transnational funding, recruitment, and logistics. DRC-focused researchers emphasize the ADF’s historically local and regional aims, and the extent to which the particular context of eastern DRC has shaped the group. Field researchers also emphasize ongoing ambiguity over the authorship of some attacks attributed to the ADF.

Global IS propaganda initially claimed ADF attacks under the banner of a “Central Africa Province” covering DRC and Mozambique, but local affiliates appear to be operationally distinct, as reflected in separate State Department FTO designations in 2021. In May 2022, IS propaganda announced a separate “province” in Mozambique, effectively acknowledging the distinction.

Support for Regional Military Operations. Congress authorizes, appropriates, and oversees U.S. security assistance for DRC, Uganda, and other countries in the region. Congress also funds and oversees U.S. support for MONUSCO, which is mandated to support DRC-led military operations. Members of Congress may consider several issues when weighing possible U.S. support for counter-ADF operations, including whether and how to mitigate possible unintended consequences. The ADF has repeatedly withstood military pressure, which in some cases appears to have led the group to escalate attacks on civilians. While Ugandan and DRC military commanders claim to have killed hundreds of ADF combatants and destroyed the group’s safe-havens since 2021, U.N. reports indicate that the ADF’s area of operations and lethality

have continued to grow. U.N.-backed operations against the ADF appeared to weaken the group in the mid-2010s, but the group soon rebounded and its new leader forged IS ties.

The poor human rights record of DRC’s military and other regional military forces, along with distrust among regional leaders, may further limit the effectiveness of counter-ADF operations and produce undesired outcomes. DRC’s imposition of martial law in ADF-affected areas since 2021 has reportedly led to the suppression of civil liberties. DRC military forces have long been accused of abusing civilians during operations. DRC military commanders reportedly collaborate with armed groups at times: a DRC general was sanctioned by the United States and U.N. Security Council in 2018 for allegedly recruiting and equipping combatants to “participate” in ADF massacres of civilians.

Uganda’s military deployment against the ADF also appears to have fueled frictions in an already tense sub-region. The Congo Research Group reported in mid-2022 that Uganda’s DRC deployment was partly motivated by economic interests, some possibly illicit. While Kinshasa agreed to the deployment, the Ugandan troop presence is politically sensitive given Uganda’s history of unilateral military interventions and proxy warfare in DRC. Some regional analysts posit that Uganda’s entry may have fueled tensions with neighboring Rwanda, further stymying regional conflict resolution efforts. DRC officials have accused Rwanda and Uganda of backing the M23 in 2022.

The East African Community, a regional bloc that DRC joined in 2022, announced plans in early 2022 to deploy a regional force against foreign-origin armed groups in eastern DRC (including the ADF), as part of a two-track approach that also envisions talks with Congolese-led groups. Many details on the initiative, known as the “Nairobi Process,” remain unclear. The Biden Administration has expressed support for the Nairobi Process, without specifically pledging to finance or otherwise facilitate the regional military intervention.

The United States has expanded some U.S. military assistance for DRC since President Félix Tshisekedi’s inauguration in 2019, but has not provided significant counterterrorism aid or equipment. Several DRC military commanders remain under U.S. sanctions due to alleged human rights abuses and/or anti-democratic actions under Tshisekedi’s predecessor, Joseph Kabila. U.S. military aid to DRC is further subject to certain restrictions pursuant to DRC’s designation under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act (Title IV of P.L. 110-457).

Sanctions. Congress may examine the impact of U.S. sanctions, which seek to isolate and deter support for the ADF. In addition to the 2021 FTO designation, U.S. sanctions have been imposed on the ADF, its leaders, and alleged financiers under executive orders pertaining to global terrorism (E.O. 13224), global human rights (E.O. 13818), and the situation in DRC (E.O. 13413). The United States first designated the ADF under the DRC-specific E.O. 13413 in 2014, in tandem with the group’s designation under the U.N. DRC sanctions program.

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