

# **The ADF Threat and Regional Stability in Central Africa: Assessing Implications and Policy Responses.**

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## **Abstract**

The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) has evolved from a Ugandan rebel faction into one of Central Africa's most dangerous transnational jihadist threats, deeply impacting regional stability. Rooted in complex socio-political grievances, ethnic exclusion, and weak governance in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the group's alignment with the Islamic State (IS) has enhanced its operational capabilities and ideological reach. The ADF's cross-border insurgency, combined with brutal tactics such as suicide bombings, beheadings, and drone surveillance, undermines state authority, regional security cooperation, and humanitarian efforts. This paper assesses the multifaceted nature of the ADF's threat, examining its historical evolution, ideological transformation, recruitment, funding mechanisms, and tactical adaptations. It further analyzes the implications for Central African security and proposes comprehensive policy responses that integrate military, socio-economic, and community-based strategies to address both local drivers and international jihadist linkages effectively.

**Keywords:** Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), Central Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Jihadist insurgency

## Introduction

The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) has emerged as one of Central Africa's most dangerous militant actors. Originally a Ugandan rebel faction in the 1990s, the group has transformed into a highly adaptable, cross-border terrorist network now entrenched largely in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (HORN International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023; Candland, O'Farrell, Poole & Weiss, 2022; Weiss, O'Farrell, Candland & Poole, 2023). Over the past decade, the ADF's evolution has been deeply influenced by its alignment with the Islamic State (IS), from which it has received financial backing, training, and global propaganda support. This partnership has significantly escalated the group's operational capacity and broadened its objective of destabilizing the wider region (HORN Institute, 2023; Candland et al., 2022; Weiss et al., 2023). Eastern DRC—already destabilized by weak governance and the presence of over 120 armed groups—has provided a conducive environment for the ADF's expansion (HORN Institute, 2023). The area's porous borders with Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Burundi, combined with steady flows of arms and displaced populations, have amplified the group's influence and reach. Since withdrawing from Uganda, the ADF has become notorious for mass killings, abductions, and indiscriminate assaults on civilians and state forces. Its violence grew even more intense after 2017, when the group underwent leadership change and fully embraced a global jihadist ideology, leading to its designation as a terrorist organization by the UN and the US (HORN Institute, 2023; Weiss et al., 2023). The ADF's threat is no longer contained within the DRC. It has conducted coordinated cross-border attacks in Uganda and attempted operations in Rwanda, adopting tactics such as suicide bombings and drone surveillance—capabilities likely enhanced through its Islamic State affiliation (Candland et al., 2022; Weiss et al., 2023; Serwat, 2025). The 2021 suicide attacks in Kampala and persistent atrocities in Beni and Ituri illustrate the group's shifting strategies, which now include beheadings, extremist media campaigns, and efforts to seize territorial control (Serwat, 2025; Candland et al., 2022). In response, Uganda and other

East African Community members have escalated joint military initiatives like Operation Shujaa, acknowledging that the ADF poses a direct threat not only to individual states but to broader regional security and integration (Lawal, 2025; HORN Institute, 2023; Ford & Karr, 2025). The ADF also exploits socio-economic grievances, youth marginalization, and local frustrations to recruit and radicalize, heightening the risk of widespread destabilization across Central Africa. Its involvement in illicit resource economies, combined with its transnational jihadist agenda, has turned Central Africa into a key battleground in the global fight against terrorism, complicating peace efforts and humanitarian work. Confronting the ADF cannot rely solely on military action. Effective response requires coordinated regional security mechanisms, community-based resilience strategies, and improved intelligence cooperation to weaken both the group's operational networks and ideological influence. A clear understanding of the ADF's origins, transformation, and strategic goals is crucial for designing policies capable of restoring stability in one of Africa's most volatile and geopolitically significant regions (HORN Institute, 2023; Candland et al., 2022; Weiss et al., 2023).

### **Historical Background and Evolution of the ADF**

The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) emerged in 1995 as a merger of several Ugandan rebel groups opposed to the government, including the Allied Democratic Movement, the National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (NALU), and radical elements from the Tablighi Jamaat Islamic movement. Its membership was largely drawn from Ugandan Muslim communities, especially the Baganda and Basoga, and it was led by Jamil Mukulu, a former Catholic who converted to Islam. From the outset, the ADF portrayed itself as an Islamist rebellion against President Yoweri Museveni's administration, claiming to respond to the persecution of Tablighis and broader political exclusion in Uganda. The group initially operated from western Uganda, an area strategically selected for its rugged terrain, its proximity to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) for refuge and recruitment, and the presence of locally sympathetic groups (Thompson, 2021). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the ADF carried out bombings and assaults on state forces inside Uganda. Over time, however, its ideological messaging became increasingly blurred, and the group retreated from public communication while tightening internal control. It consolidated its presence in the border zones of North Kivu in eastern DRC, capitalizing on weak state authority and unregulated border movement. Despite sustained offensives by Ugandan and

Congolese troops, the ADF's resilience was supported by enduring recruitment channels and logistical backing—reportedly including assistance from Sudan during its early years (Thompson, 2021). A turning point came after the 2015 arrest and extradition of Jamil Mukulu. Leadership passed to his deputy, Musa Baluku, who initiated a deeper ideological shift toward global jihadism. By 2019, the Islamic State (IS) officially acknowledged the group as part of its Central Africa Province. Under this new alignment, the ADF intensified its attacks on civilians, military forces, and UN peacekeepers, employing harsher tactics such as suicide operations and attempting to seize and govern territory in eastern DRC. This escalation prompted joint regional military responses, including Uganda's Operation Shujaa (United Nations, 2004; Thompson, 2021). Throughout its trajectory, the ADF has leveraged local socio-political grievances, ethnic divisions, and economic exclusion to secure recruits and embed itself within communities—often through marriages and social integration. At the same time, its participation in illicit resource economies and its integration into international jihadist networks have expanded its capabilities and made it a major destabilizing force in Central Africa. The group's evolution—from a Uganda-based insurgency to a cross-border extremist organization linked to global terrorism—illustrates the growing intersection between localized rebellion and international jihadist movements in the region.

### **Objectives and ideology**

The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) originated as a Ugandan insurgent movement driven by a blend of political, ethnic, and religious motivations, but **has** since transformed into a hardline jihadist group with clear transnational Islamist ambitions. In its early phase during the mid-1990s, the ADF aimed to topple the Ugandan state, fueled largely by frustrations among Muslim minority communities—especially Tablighi Jamaat adherents—and by ethnic demands such as the Bakonjo people's quest for autonomy. Its initial ideological outlook was inconsistent, mixing Islamist rhetoric with secular and ethno-nationalist goals. This lack of coherence led some scholars to describe the ADF as a "rebellion without a cause" in its early years (Thompson, 2021).

The group's direction shifted significantly after the 2015 capture of its founder, Jamil Mukulu, and the rise of Musa Baluku as leader. Under Baluku, the ADF embraced Salafi-jihadist ideology and formally aligned itself with the Islamic State (IS), becoming part of IS's Central Africa Province around 2019. This transition marked a clearer strategic and ideological focus on creating a strict

Islamic caliphate in Central Africa. Today, the ADF enforces an uncompromising version of Sharia law in areas under its control, advocates Islamic financial systems, and engages in extreme violence, including suicide attacks, beheadings, and assaults against civilians, security forces, and UN personnel (HORN International Institute for Strategic Studies ,2023; Thompson,2021).

Despite its global jihadist orientation, the ADF remains rooted in local socio-political dynamics. It capitalizes on economic exclusion, ethnic divisions, and the marginalization of Muslim youth along the Uganda–Congo frontier to sustain recruitment and operations. Although its ideological scope has widened, the group continues to rely heavily on local grievances and weak state institutions to entrench itself within surrounding communities.

### **Recruitment and source(s) of funding**

The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) recruit their members through a blend of coercion, deception, and the exploitation of socio-economic hardship, primarily targeting vulnerable communities in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and nearby Uganda. UN Group of Experts reports, along with testimonies from former fighters, reveal that the ADF often attract both adults and children with false promises of jobs, education, and better living conditions. Once recruited—sometimes as young as 9 or 10 years old—individuals are subjected to forced military training and pushed into active combat. The group relies on abductions, ideological indoctrination, and the manipulation of local grievances linked to ethnic conflict and economic exclusion. Recruiters frequently cross borders to kidnap or pressure young people and adults into joining. Children, many of whom are forcibly conscripted, form a notable share of the group's fighting force. As military pressure intensifies, women and children are reportedly relocated to safer zones, while boys and men undergo combat training (United Nations,2004). Uganda's army has freed numerous children from ADF bases, including some on Buvuma Island in Lake Victoria. Inside its camps, the ADF maintains strict internal control, enforcing its own version of Sharia law and even operating an Islamic-style banking system that obliges members to deposit money (Thompson,2021).

Financially, the ADF sustains itself through a mix of income streams. Key among these are profits from illegal natural resource activities—such as unregulated mining and charcoal production—in

the mineral-rich but weakly governed regions of eastern DRC. These ventures fund the group's armed operations. Additional revenue comes from extortion, imposing taxes on communities under its rule, and possibly ransom payments from kidnappings. While its affiliation with the Islamic State offers ideological alignment and limited logistical backing, clear evidence of substantial direct financial support from IS remains uncertain (Thompson,2021).

### **Targets and Tactics**

The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) deliberately target civilians, security personnel, and key infrastructure, increasingly focusing on instilling fear, weakening state authority, and expanding their presence across Central Africa. Civilians continue to suffer the most from ADF violence, as the group routinely carries out massacres, kidnappings, and indiscriminate killings in towns and villages, especially in Ituri and North Kivu provinces in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). A recent example is the attack in Komanda (Ituri), where at least 49 civilians—including nine children—were murdered with bladed weapons during a church night vigil. This incident followed earlier attacks in the same month that left 82 people dead, underscoring the ADF's persistent targeting of unarmed populations, often during religious events or in spaces assumed to be safe. By striking worshippers, households, and commercial areas, the ADF aims to spread terror, destabilize daily life, and punish those viewed as supporting the government. Security forces are also a major focus of ADF operations. The group frequently ambushes and assaults the Congolese army (FARDC), the Uganda People's Defense Forces (UPDF), and UN peacekeepers (MONUSCO) in an effort to undermine military efforts and maintain territorial influence. These attacks range from hit-and-run operations to more advanced strikes involving improvised explosive devices (IEDs), weakening regional stabilization efforts (U.S. Department of State, 2022). The ADF further disrupts state authority by targeting strategic routes, such as the RN4 corridor between Beni and Kasindi, restricting movement, trade, and supply chains—ultimately damaging economic activity and regional connectivity. Beyond the DRC, the ADF has expanded its reach to regional and cross-border targets, including major cities like Kampala, Uganda, where it has carried out suicide bombings since 2021—an escalation linked to its alignment with the Islamic State (IS). The group has also attempted attacks in Rwanda, indicating ambitions that extend beyond eastern Congo and highlighting a growing regional threat (CBS News ,2025; Bahati & El-Bay,2021).

The ADF employs a wide range of brutal and adaptive tactics designed to maximize terror, extend operational longevity, and withstand intensified military offensives in Central Africa. Once a localized insurgency, it has evolved into a more sophisticated jihadist organization affiliated with IS, blending guerrilla warfare with newer technologies. Operating largely in the dense forest regions of Ituri and North Kivu, the group relies on ambushes, raids, and surprise attacks against military convoys, civilians, and security positions, taking advantage of difficult terrain and porous borders to evade capture. To avoid large-scale confrontations with joint Congolese–Ugandan operations such as Operation Shujaa, the ADF has fragmented into smaller, mobile units, shifting camps frequently and consolidating fighters in fewer, more defensible locations (Soufan Center, 2025; Serwat, 2025). Since 2021, the group has adopted suicide bombings—a major tactical shift influenced by IS. It also employs IEDs against both civilian and military targets to inflict mass casualties and disrupt government and peacekeeping operations (Serwat,2025; Lawal,2025). Another emerging capability is the use of drones, mainly for surveillance; in August 2024, the group attempted to arm drones with explosives to strike Congolese troops, pointing to growing technical support likely sourced from IS Central (Serwat,2025). The ADF continues to use extreme violence—including beheadings, mass killings, abductions, and attacks on places of worship—as both a terror tool and a means of controlling communities (Soufan Center 2025). Parallel to its military strategy, the group has increased online propaganda aligned with IS media practices, using digital platforms to recruit, radicalize, and project its jihadist identity beyond local audiences. Despite sustained military pressure, the ADF seeks to control resource-rich territory, imposing taxes and exploiting mining sites to fund operations. When possible, it establishes semi-permanent control to sustain recruitment and revenue (Serwat,2025). Cross-border attacks in Uganda and attempted incursions into Rwanda further demonstrate its intention to expand its violent campaign regionally (Serwat ,2025). However, in response to intensified offensives, the group avoids major direct confrontations, instead relying on mobility, fragmentation, and guerrilla tactics to survive and retain influence (Serwat ,2025).

### **what are the Structural causes for ADF terrorism threat in central Africa?**

The structural causes of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) terrorism threat in Central Africa are deeply embedded in a complex matrix of political, socioeconomic, ethnic, and regional dynamics that create a conducive environment for the group's continued insurgency and violent activities. A

detailed and comprehensive examination of these factors reveals the multi-layered nature of the problem.

Central to the ADF's entrenchment is the weak and fragile governance in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the neighboring border regions. These areas suffer from limited state authority, ineffective law enforcement, and poor public service delivery, which collectively constitute a governance vacuum. This absence of strong state institutions enables the ADF to exploit ungoverned spaces, establish bases, and conduct cross-border operations with relative ease. The porosity of borders between the DRC and Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania facilitates the illicit flow of arms, fighters, and resources, thereby sustaining the operational capability of the ADF and complicating military efforts against it (Candland et al., 2022; Thompson, 2021).

The group's origins and evolution are deeply tied to unresolved historical grievances and ethnic exclusion. Initially formed in the mid-1990s through alliances involving Uganda's Tablighi Islamic sect and political dissidents, the ADF initially articulated grievances around political marginalization and discrimination against Muslim minorities and certain ethnic communities such as the Baganda and Basoga. These grievances fostered a sense of exclusion and marginalization which the ADF capitalized upon for recruitment and local support. Over time, this local grievance-based insurgency morphed into a more ideologically driven jihadist movement, blending indigenous socio-political discontent with transnational Islamist ideology (Thompson, 2021; CSIS, 2021).

The pervasive socioeconomic marginalization of the eastern DRC region intensifies vulnerabilities exploited by the ADF. Despite being resource-rich, the local populations endure widespread poverty, lack of employment opportunities, and infrastructural deficits. The ADF takes advantage of this socioeconomic deprivation by coercing or enticing recruits from marginalized communities, often including children. Financially, the group sustains its insurgency through illicit activities such as illegal mining, charcoal production, smuggling, extortion, and taxation within the territories it controls. This illicit economy not only funds terrorist operations but also entrenches local dependence on the group, undermining state legitimacy and development efforts (Weiss et al., 2023; Soufan Center, 2025).

The regional security environment compounds the complexity of the ADF threat. The Great Lakes region constitutes a security complex wherein inter-state relations, historical mistrust, and rivalry impede cohesive counterterrorism cooperation. States like Uganda, Rwanda, and the DRC have competing strategic interests and differing threat perceptions related to the ADF, resulting in fragmented and sometimes counterproductive military engagements. For instance, Uganda's unilateral military operations, while aiming to suppress the ADF, can inadvertently fuel anti-Ugandan sentiments within the DRC, deepening local conflicts and sustaining insecurity. These dynamics exemplify security dilemmas at the regional level that militant groups exploit (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Candland et al., 2022).

A significant structural shift occurred with the ADF's alignment with the Islamic State (IS) over the past decade. This affiliation introduced new tactical capabilities such as suicide bombings, improvised explosive devices, and drone surveillance, reflecting operational and ideological influences of IS global jihadism. The group's adoption of IS branding and propaganda techniques has elevated its profile and external legitimacy, enhancing recruitment beyond local grievances and integrating it into broader transnational networks of violent extremism. This ideological globalization of the ADF complicates counterterrorism responses, demanding multi-level approaches that address both local drivers and international jihadist linkages (Candland et al., 2022; Soufan Center, 2025).

### **Implications for Regional Security in Central Africa**

The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) have far-reaching and complex consequences for regional security in Central Africa, contributing significantly to instability in an already fragile and volatile region. Their evolution into a transnational jihadist organization affiliated with the Islamic State (IS) has further complicated an already challenging security environment, weakening state authority, worsening humanitarian conditions, and straining regional cooperation.

The ADF's ongoing insurgency continues to destabilize eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and extends its impact into neighboring states such as Uganda and Rwanda. The group carries out extreme forms of violence—massacres, kidnappings, and suicide attacks—against civilians, the Congolese Armed Forces (FARDC), Ugandan troops, and UN peacekeepers

(MONUSCO). Such attacks erode government legitimacy and obstruct ongoing stabilization efforts. For example, even during Operation Shujaa (2021–2025), a joint counterterrorism mission by Uganda and the DRC, the ADF has repeatedly relocated its bases, avoiding total defeat and sustaining insecurity (ADF 2025; Serwat ,2025).

The group's continued threat has compelled regional military responses, including Uganda's deployment of nearly 5,000 troops to eastern DRC by early 2025. However, simultaneous conflicts involving other armed groups such as M23 overstretch the FARDC and regional security forces, reducing their effectiveness against the ADF. This divided focus leaves security gaps that the ADF exploits to consolidate control in less-patrolled areas (ADF 2025; Serwat ,2025).

The ADF's activities are no longer limited to Congolese territory but now include cross-border operations, such as suicide bombings in Kampala and attempted attacks in Rwanda. These incidents have heightened fears of broader jihadist expansion across East and Central Africa. The group's widening operational reach—especially in Ituri and North Kivu—obstructs regional integration initiatives and undermines economic cooperation (Byobe Malenga, 2025; Ladd Serwat 2025).

Additionally, ADF violence drives large-scale displacement, deepening an already severe humanitarian crisis. Repeated assaults on villages result in mass killings, destruction of infrastructure, and thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Insecure conditions limit humanitarian access, while the ADF's scorched-earth tactics and coercive taxation of local populations worsen economic hardship and social exclusion (Malenga,2025; Serwat,2025).

Moreover, the ADF takes advantage of weak governance, porous borders, and local ethnic tensions to embed itself within communities. It recruits marginalized youth and profits from illicit economies, including mining and charcoal trafficking. These dynamics reinforce cycles of insecurity and empower other armed groups, complicating peacebuilding, state-building, and development initiatives (ADF,2025).

## **Conclusion**

The ADF represents a complex and adaptive insurgent threat that transcends national borders and traditional conflict paradigms in Central Africa. Its persistence is fueled by entrenched governance weaknesses, porous regional borders, socio-economic marginalization, and ethnic tensions, compounded by its integration into global jihadist networks through IS affiliation. Military interventions alone have not sufficed to neutralize the group, as it continuously adapts through fragmentation, guerrilla tactics, and exploitation of local grievances. Sustainable security and stability in the region necessitate a coordinated regional approach that balances force with efforts to strengthen institutions, enhance economic opportunities, and build resilient communities. Failure to adopt holistic and innovative policies risks further destabilization, wider jihadist expansion, and prolonged humanitarian crises in a geopolitically critical region.

## **Policy Responses**

### **Regional Security Coordination and Intelligence Sharing**

Establish a centralized multilateral security framework among DRC, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania focused on real-time intelligence sharing, joint operations, and unified strategies against ADF. This must include cross-border patrols and synchronized military campaigns to reduce safe havens and disrupt supply lines.

### **Community-Based Resilience Programs**

Implement grassroots initiatives that empower local communities economically and socially to resist ADF recruitment. This includes youth vocational training, education access, and programs addressing ethnic grievances to undermine the ADF's socio-political leverage.

### **Hybrid Counterterrorism Tactics**

Combine conventional military operations with innovative technologies such as drone surveillance, cyber monitoring of extremist propaganda, and targeted psychological operations to disrupt recruitment and funding networks. Investment in technical training for local forces is critical.

### **Governance and Institutional Strengthening**

Support efforts to reinforce state presence and service delivery in eastern DRC and border regions through anti-corruption measures, judicial reforms, and improved security sector governance. Strengthening local police and justice mechanisms can reduce reliance on militarized responses alone.

### **Socioeconomic Development and Resource Governance**

Address illicit resource economies that finance the ADF by improving transparency and regulation in mining and charcoal sectors. Promote sustainable livelihoods to reduce economic dependency on armed groups.

### **Counter-Ideology and De-Radicalization Campaigns**

Develop culturally sensitive counter-narratives that challenge extremist ideology, leveraging local religious leaders and credible voices. Rehabilitation programs for former combatants should be expanded to prevent recidivism.

### **Humanitarian Access and Protection Measures**

Enhance humanitarian corridors and protection strategies for displaced populations affected by ADF violence, including coordinated efforts among governments, UN agencies, and NGOs to alleviate the prolonged humanitarian crisis.

### **International Partnerships and Funding**

Secure sustained international support beyond military aid, focusing on development, governance, and human security programs. Engagement with global and regional institutions can amplify the impact of counter-ADF initiatives. These recommendations recognize the ADF's multifaceted nature and stress a holistic approach—not relying solely on military force but integrating socio-political, economic, and ideological measures designed for long-term regional stability and resilience.

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