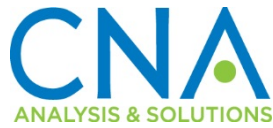


# Sources of Resilience in the Lord's Resistance Army

Pamela Faber

April 2017





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## Abstract

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), led by Ugandan national Joseph Kony, has survived for over three decades despite a concerted effort to defeat it. The LRA was formed in the late 1980s in response to the historic marginalization of the Acholi people, inequitable treatment by the Ugandan government and uneven development across the country. The LRA became a powerfully destructive force in northern Uganda, with thousands of combatants killing over 100,000 people. Since 2006, the group has been largely degraded to less than 150 core combatants, and is currently in survival mode on the borders of the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, and South Sudan. Despite these setbacks, the LRA is still active in central Africa and serves as a lesson in resiliency and survival. In March 2017, U.S. Africa Command announced the end of its anti-LRA operations. Although some observers see the operation as a success, it failed to capture Kony or to eliminate the group. This paper argues that the LRA has two major sources of resilience: it positions itself within the nexus of four interconnected conflicts in the region, and it adapts its tactics to changes in its capabilities and environment. The resilience of the LRA has implications both for its potential resurgence and for other armed groups who may look to it as a template for survival.

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# Introduction

Joseph Kony, the charismatic leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), has led one of the most enduring rebel insurgencies in sub-Saharan Africa. Kony's brutality toward civilians, including the use of child soldiers and sex slaves, and his destabilizing impact on central and eastern Africa, has been the focus of attention from the media, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and numerous governments since the late 1980s. This attention has led to concerted efforts to defeat the LRA and capture or kill Kony by multiple partners, including the African Union (AU), Uganda, and the United States. Partially as a result of these efforts, the LRA has been effectively degraded from a group that was once able to kill over 100,000 people,<sup>1</sup> abduct tens of thousands, and displace over 2 million people in Uganda from 1987 to 2006,<sup>2</sup> to one that currently comprises fewer than 150 core combatants<sup>3</sup> in survival mode on the borders of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, and South Sudan.<sup>4</sup>

The LRA is a vestige of the group it once was. Even in its weakened state, however, it has proven resilient. Militants continue to abduct and kill civilians, and are increasingly involved in cross-border smuggling and criminal networks.<sup>5</sup> Despite rumors of his ill health,<sup>6</sup> Kony's ability to evade capture also symbolizes the group's

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<sup>1</sup> The Resolve, "Key Statistics," The Resolve: LRA Crisis Initiative, accessed 3/1/2017, <http://www.theresolve.org/the-lra-crisis/key-statistics/>.

<sup>2</sup> Project Enough, "Beginnings in Uganda," Enough: The project to end genocide and crimes against humanity, accessed 2/28/2017, <http://www.enoughproject.org/conflicts/lra/beginnings-in-uganda>.

<sup>3</sup> AFRICOM, "United States Africa Command 2017 Posture Statement", 2017, accessed 3/25/2017, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Waldhauser\\_03-09-17.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Waldhauser_03-09-17.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Children Invisible, "Tracking Joseph Kony," LRA Crisis Tracker, 2017, accessed 3/1/2017, <https://www.lracrisistracker.com/>.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ronan, *The State of the LRA in 2016*, LRA Crisis Tracker, Invisible Children and The Resolve: LRA Crisis Initiative 2016, accessed February 7, 2017, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/The-State-of-the-LRA-2016-Final.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> "Kony battling deadly stomach ulcers," *Daily Monitor*, February 2, 2017, accessed February 6, 2017, <http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Kony-battling-deadly-stomach-ulcers/688334-3796922-e9owr3/index.html>.

endurance. Though Kony will eventually be killed, be captured, or die, the LRA's operational model for survival may continue to function after Kony's death through a successor and/or be co-opted by other actors in the region. Understanding the survivability and resilience of the LRA is necessary not only for defeating Kony and the LRA, but also for combating future groups who may adopt the LRA's strategies.

This paper argues that the LRA has survived, despite being hunted by multiple militaries over the course of nearly three decades, because it has developed two major points of resiliency. First, Kony as an individual and the LRA as a whole have successfully positioned themselves within the nexus of four interconnected conflicts in the region, rendering a successful counter-LRA strategy very difficult to achieve. Second, Kony and the LRA have adapted their tactics in response to changing circumstances. The LRA can shift from an active insurgent group to a discrete criminal network in accordance with changes in its capabilities and environment. This resilience can lead to regeneration of the LRA if the group's ability to withstand internal divisions and environmental challenges outlasts the resolve of the international community to defeat Kony and his group.

The remainder of this paper will be organized as follows. We open with a section on the emergence of the LRA in Uganda, focusing on its leader, ideology, and tactics. This section also details counter-LRA activity to date. We then identify two sources of LRA resilience. Following that, we discuss the LRA's points of weakness. We close by identifying how the resiliency of the LRA can have implications for other armed groups.

# Background: The Emergence of the LRA

Several interrelated factors contributed to the emergence of the LRA, including inequitable colonial and post-colonial treatment of people in northern and southern Uganda, significant disenfranchisement of specific ethnic groups, civil war, and uneven development and prosperity across the country. This section will briefly discuss the following: the historical conditions from which the LRA emerged; the LRA's leader, Joseph Kony; the group's ideology and tactics to date; and previous counter-LRA operations, which have included U.S. involvement.

## Pre-LRA Ugandan history

Under colonialism, the British favored development in the south of Uganda, providing Bantu-speaking southerners with education and advancement opportunities, while the Nilotic-speaking northerners served as migrant laborers and military recruits.<sup>7</sup> This uneven development was the result of the colonizers' unsubstantiated determination that the people of the north were strong and hardworking, while those in the south were weak and lazy yet intellectually superior.<sup>8</sup> There was a religious component to the division, as the British administered the Muslim majority territory in the north and east separately from the Christian majority territory.<sup>9</sup> As the British prioritized the creation of an agricultural economy,

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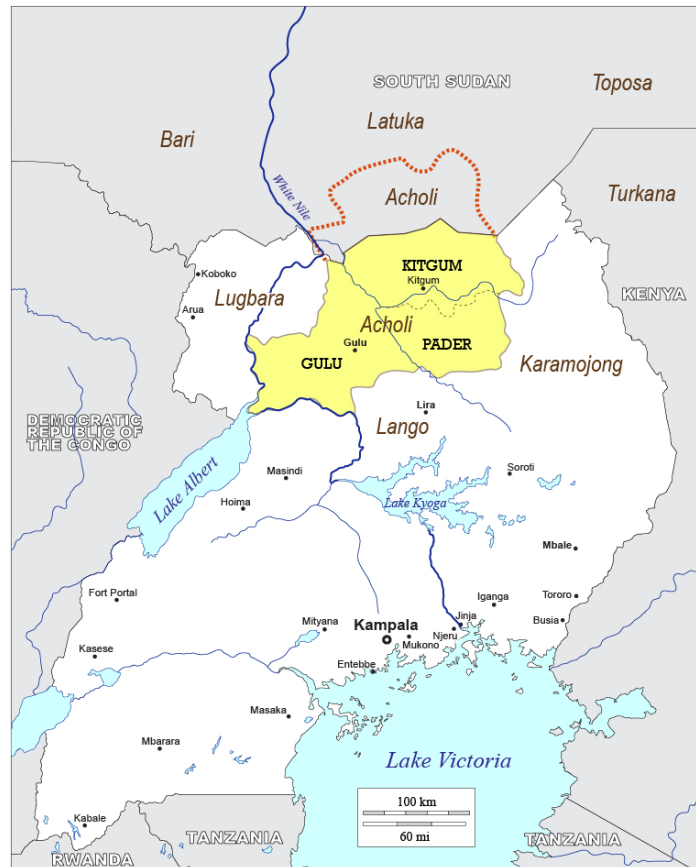
<sup>7</sup> Frederick Golooba-Mutebi, "Collapse, war and reconstruction in Uganda: An analytical narrative on state-making," Crisis States Working Papers Series No. 2 (2008), accessed 3/6/2017.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Amone and Okullu Muura, "British Colonialism and the Creation of Acholi Ethnic Identity in Uganda, 1894 to 1962," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 42, no. 2 (2014), accessed 3/1/2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2013.851844>.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Kustenbauder, "Northern Uganda: Protracted Conflict and Structures of Violence", *War and Peace in Africa* (2010), accessed 3/1/2017, <https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/5128469/Kustenbauder%20-%20LRA%20Uganda%20chapter%20for%20DASH.pdf?sequence=3>. British practices in Uganda paralleled their administrative strategies in other African colonies, notably Nigeria and Sudan.

they viewed the pastoralist Acholi ethnic group in the north (see Figure 1) as particularly primitive.<sup>10</sup> These perceived divisions led to the reduction and calcification of previously nuanced and fluid local identities in Uganda to a constructed ethnic/tribal-oriented identity. These trends contributed to the creation of an Acholi-specific identity where the Acholi saw themselves as poorer than other groups, but as militarily stronger.<sup>11</sup> The association of localized grievances with “tribal” identity affected the tumultuous leadership struggle in the post-independence era.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 1. Acholi sub-region in Uganda



Source: Michael Markowitz.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Amone and Muura, “British Colonialism and the Creation of Acholi Ethnic Identity in Uganda, 1894 to 1962.”

Uganda gained independence from Great Britain in 1962, led by Milton Obote, who served first as prime minister and then as president of Uganda.<sup>13</sup> Obote, an ethnic Lango from northern Uganda, was overthrown by Idi Amin Dada in a military coup in 1971. Amin's brutal eight-year dictatorial rule left a massive death toll, with estimates ranging from 80,000 to 500,000.<sup>14</sup> Amin, of mixed Kakwa and Lungara ethnicity, particularly targeted the northern Acholi people because of their support for Obote, and because they made up a large percentage of the armed forces and were thus seen as a threat.<sup>15</sup> Discontent grew until, in 1979, Amin lost support and fled Uganda. Rigged elections in 1980 returned Obote to power, and incited Yoweri Museveni, a former intelligence officer under Obote who helped oust Idi Amin, to launch a guerilla war, often called the Ugandan Bush War or Ugandan Civil War (1981-1986).<sup>16</sup> Obote was overthrown a second time in 1985 by General Tito Okello. Museveni soon outmaneuvered Okello, however, and seized power in 1986. He remains in power today.<sup>17</sup> Figure 2 shows a timeline of Uganda's history since it gained independence.

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<sup>13</sup> Julian Marshall, "Milton Obote," *The Guardian*, October 12, 2005, accessed 2/28/2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2005/oct/12/guardianobituaries.hearafrika05>.

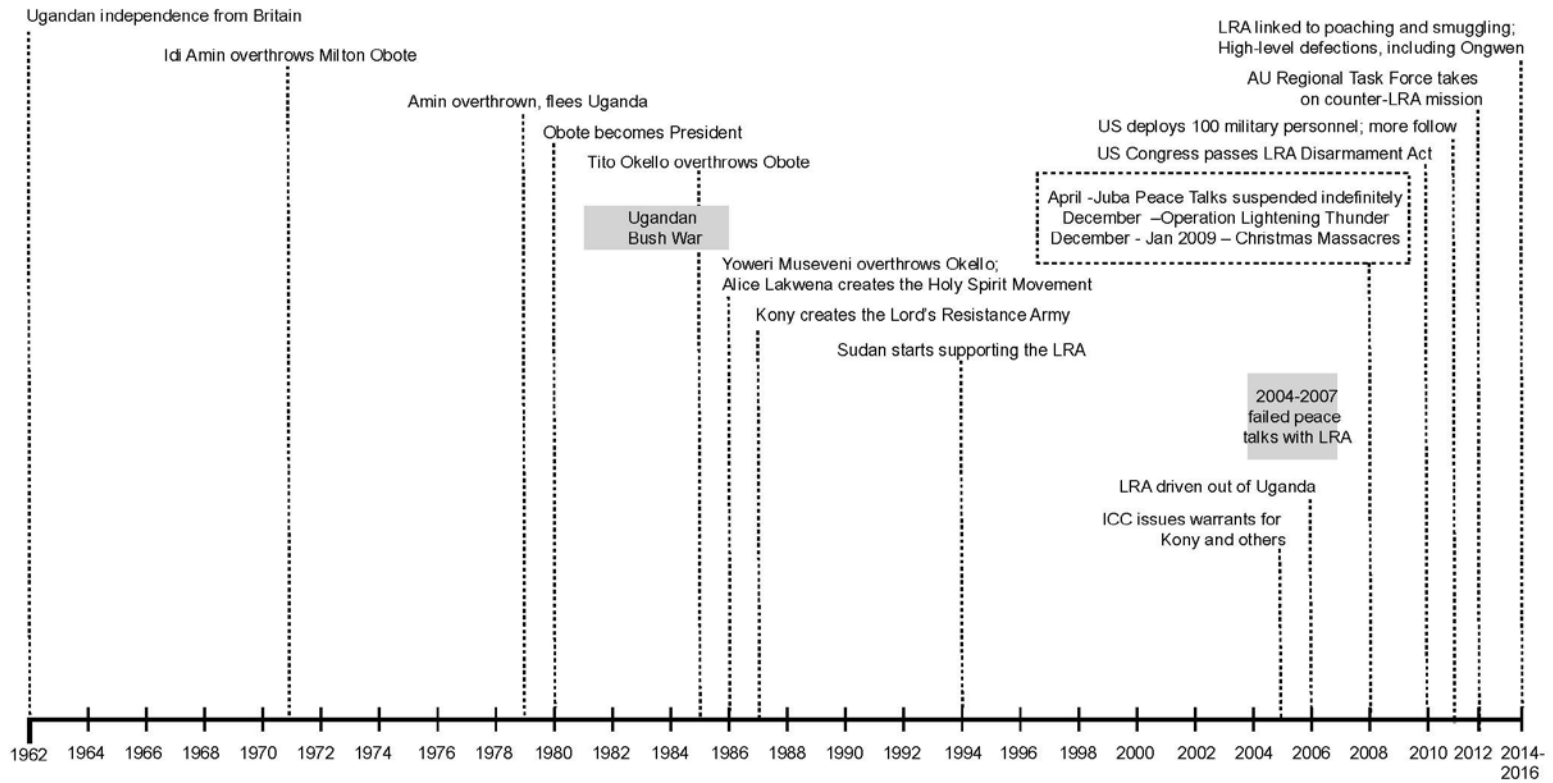
<sup>14</sup> Patrick Keatley, "Idi Amin," *The Guardian*, August 18, 2003, accessed 2/28/17, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2003/aug/18/guardianobituaries>.

<sup>15</sup> "Beginnings in Uganda."

<sup>16</sup> News BBC, "Yoweri Museveni - Uganda's president profiled," BBC News, 17 February 2016, accessed 3/1/2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-12421747>.

<sup>17</sup> "Beginnings in Uganda."

Figure 2. Timeline of Uganda and the LRA



Source: Michael Markowitz.



## The rise of Joseph Kony and the LRA

Though Museveni presided over sustained periods of growth and poverty reduction in much of the country,<sup>18</sup> large parts of the north remained undeveloped and marginalized.<sup>19</sup> In the late 1980s, a lack of development in the north and the historical marginalization of the Acholi ethnic group led to the rise of multiple insurgent groups who sought to overthrow Museveni.<sup>20</sup> The Lord's Resistance Army, formed by charismatic leader Joseph Kony in 1987, was one such insurgent group; it has carried out the longest and most violent Acholi insurgency in Uganda.

Joseph Kony is an Acholi from northern Uganda and is a self-styled prophet, messiah, and medium<sup>21</sup> whose involvement in a huge number of verifiable atrocities has generated a sizeable international effort to capture or kill him.<sup>22</sup> Born in the early 1960s in Odek, Kony was heavily influenced by Alice Auma, aka "Lakwena," a mystic (referred to as a former prostitute and/or Kony's cousin in some reports),<sup>23</sup> who formed the Holy Spirit Movement in the 1980s. This movement combined Acholi nationalism with mysticism, as Lakwena championed the Acholi people while promising immortality in the face of Ugandan bullets. This and other similar groups were formed partially as response to the violence committed against northern Ugandans by Museveni's rebel army during the Ugandan Bush War. After Lakwena was defeated by Museveni's forces and fled to Kenya, Kony founded his own rebel group with a similar premise, naming it the Lord's Resistance Army, which coopted

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<sup>18</sup> The World Bank, "Uganda: Overview," The World Bank, Dec 08, 2016, accessed 3/1/2017, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/uganda/overview>.

<sup>19</sup> Kustenbauder, "Northern Uganda: Protracted Conflict and Structures of Violence".

<sup>20</sup> Mark Kersten, *Justice in conflict : the effects of the International Criminal Court's interventions on ending war and building peace*, (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Alexis Arieff, Lauren Ploch Blanchard, and Tomas F. Husted, "The Lord's Resistance Army: The U.S. Response," Congressional Research Service, 2015, accessed 3/1/2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42094.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> News BBC, "Joseph Kony: Profile of the LRA leader," BBC News, March 8, 2012, accessed 3/23/2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-17299084>.

many Holy Spirit followers.<sup>24</sup> Other sources indicate that Kony “inherited” the Holy Spirit Movement from Lakwena and changed its name.<sup>25</sup>

Kony established the LRA ostensibly to reclaim the honor of the Acholi people and to establish a government based on a mixture of Acholi mysticism and the Ten Commandments.<sup>26</sup> Kony claims to be a spirit medium who receives prophecy from at least 12 divine messengers,<sup>27</sup> and often speaks to his followers in tongues.<sup>28</sup> All facets of life in the LRA are tightly controlled and steeped in ritual, such as battle preparation that includes the ceremonial anointment of oil in the shape of a cross as a means to protect fighters against enemy bullets.

Despite the alleged goal of championing the disenfranchised Acholi, Kony has taken very few rational steps to further this political agenda, and, on multiple occasions, has failed to advantageously use negotiations to gain concessions from the Ugandan government.<sup>29</sup> Rather, Kony has weaponized legitimate historical grievances of northern Ugandans as a pretext for carrying out civilian violence on a massive scale. By the early 2000s, Kony controlled an estimated 3,000 combatants, with tens of thousands of children and young people passing through LRA control via abductions.<sup>30</sup>

Kony has routinely demonstrated suspicion of LRA commanders and has purged his own leadership,<sup>31</sup> including commanders who had lived and fought with him for decades after being abducted as young boys.<sup>32</sup> Some of these suspicions have been

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> C.J. Chivers, “Religious Beliefs of Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army,” *New York Times*, December 31, 2010, accessed 3/23/2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/documents/religious-beliefs-of-joseph-konys-lords-resistance-army>.

<sup>26</sup> Center National Counterterrorism, “Lord's Resistance Army (LRA),” Counter Terrorism Guide, accessed 2/28/2017, <https://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/lra.html>.

<sup>27</sup> “Religious Beliefs of Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army.”

<sup>28</sup> “Joseph Kony: Profile of the LRA leader.”

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> The Resolve, “Basic History,” The Resolve: LRA Crisis Initiative, July 2010, accessed 3/8/17, <http://www.theresolve.org/the-lra-crisis/basic-history/>.

<sup>31</sup> Press Associated, “Joseph Kony hands over reins of LRA to son, official says,” CBS News, May 20, 2014, accessed 3/1/2017, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/joseph-kony-hands-over-reins-of-lra-to-son-official-says/>.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Tracker LRA, *Dominic Ongwen's Domino Effect*, The Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative, January 2017, accessed February 6, 2017, <http://www.theresolve.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Dominic-Ongwens-Domino-Effect-January-2017.pdf>.

justified, given the dissatisfaction that top commanders have felt over Kony's irrationality in the face of diminishing resources and dwindling battlefield successes in the past decade. This has led to multiple waves of high-level defections,<sup>33</sup> causing LRA ranks to dwindle to an estimated 800 core combatants in 2008. Today there are an estimated 140 core combatants—located in border areas between Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, and South Sudan—though many thousands of abductees are still forced to work in bush camps in various capacities.<sup>34</sup>

## LRA notoriety and counter-LRA activities

The LRA gained international attention because of the brutality of its tactics. In addition to massacring hundreds of people during each attack in the pre-2006 era, the LRA routinely maimed survivors by cutting off ears, lips, noses, and hands.<sup>35</sup> The LRA uses abductions, often of children, to fill its ranks of soldiers, sex slaves, and porters.<sup>36</sup> The LRA amassed funds by pillaging villages, which would face harsh reprisals if Kony believed members of the villages were helping the Ugandan army or LRA defectors.<sup>37</sup>

As a result of its brutal actions, the LRA has faced repeated military operations to destroy it. These operations have been led primarily by Ugandan forces, who have killed a number of high-ranking LRA commanders, including Santo Alit (September 2009), Okello Kalalang (September 2009), Bok Abudema (December 2009), Binany Okumu (January 2013), Samuel Kangul (November 2013), and Okot Odhiambo (December 2013).<sup>38</sup> In some cases, such as the 2008 Christmas Massacres, these operations have been met with additional brutality by the LRA. These massacres, which took place between December 24, 2008, and mid-January 2009, began after the Ugandan army attacked an LRA camp in northern DRC. In response, LRA combatants massacred at least 865 civilians, raped hundreds of women and girls, and abducted

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Ronan, "The closing of The Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative and what's next," The Resolve, January 31, 2017, accessed February 3, 2017, <http://www.theresolve.org/2017/01/the-closing-of-the-resolve-lra-crisis-initiative-and-whats-next/>.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Plaut, "Behind the LRA's terror tactics," BBC News, 17 February 2009, accessed 3/1/2017, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7885885.stm>.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Eichstaedt, *First Kill Your Family : Child Soldiers of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army*, (Chicago, Illinois: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013).

<sup>37</sup> IRIN, "LRA reprisal attacks increase in the northeast," IRIN, 10 June 2009, accessed 3/1/2017, <http://www.irinnews.org/news/2009/06/10/lra-reprisal-attacks-increase-northeast>.

<sup>38</sup> LRA, *Dominic Ongwen's Domino Effect*.

over 160 children. Many of the victims died during three simultaneous attacks on December 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> when LRA combatants attacked villagers congregated for Christmas festivities, hacking victims to death with machetes and axes, or crushing their skulls with clubs.<sup>39</sup>

Since 2008, the United States has provided financial, logistical, and diplomatic support to Ugandan military operations involved in counter-LRA activities.<sup>40</sup> U.S. interest in counter-LRA activity is the result of three factors: the threat to regional stability and Uganda's role as a U.S. security partner; international attention given to widespread LRA-inflicted human suffering; and congressionally influential U.S.-based advocacy groups.<sup>41</sup>

Counter-LRA efforts have included a failed Ugandan-led operation to capture or kill Kony, called Operation Lightning Thunder.<sup>42</sup> In 2010, the U.S. Congress passed the LRA Disarmament and Northern Ugandan Recovery Act, which led to the deployment of U.S. special operations forces (SOF) tasked to aid Ugandan and AU troops for counter-LRA operations, including large-scale defection campaigns aimed at top LRA commanders.<sup>43</sup> Since 2012, most counter-LRA efforts have been led by an AU Regional Task Force.<sup>44</sup> In 2014, the Obama administration deployed more personnel and U.S. military aircraft. The State Department designated Kony a global terrorist in 2008, and, in 2013, offered a \$5 million reward for information leading to his capture.

As a result of this prioritization, the LRA has been featured in multiple U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) Theater Campaign Plans and Posture Statements, and has been discussed in congressional testimony by General Waldhauser, commander of AFRICOM, as recently as March 2017, in the context of the group's deeply degraded

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<sup>39</sup> Human Rights Watch, "The Christmas Massacres: LRA attacks on Civilians in Northern Congo," Human Rights Watch, February 16, 2009, 2009, accessed 3/24/2017, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/02/16/christmas-massacres/lra-attacks-civilians-northern-congo#8c0adf>.

<sup>40</sup> "The Lord's Resistance Army: The U.S. Response."

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> "Basic History."

<sup>43</sup> Ledio Cakaj and Paul Ronan, "The Lord's Resistance Army is finally weakening in central Africa. This could dismantle it," *Washington Post*, December 6, 2016, accessed February 6, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/06/uganda-is-about-to-give-up-looking-for-joseph-kony-but-defection-messaging-could-bring-his-army-to-a-halt/?utm\\_term=.3e2537440602](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/06/uganda-is-about-to-give-up-looking-for-joseph-kony-but-defection-messaging-could-bring-his-army-to-a-halt/?utm_term=.3e2537440602).

<sup>44</sup> "The Lord's Resistance Army: The U.S. Response."

capacity to do harm.<sup>45</sup> Despite the apparent success of the U.S. approach to counter the LRA, the longevity of the effort and its associated cost has led some policymakers to question whether the response is commensurate to U.S. interests in the region.<sup>46</sup>

In early 2017, the Ugandan government stated its intention to withdraw troops from the counter-LRA operations in CAR, citing a lack of international support.<sup>47</sup> Soon thereafter, in late March 2017, U.S. Africa Command stated that the LRA has been reduced to “irrelevance.”<sup>48</sup> On March 29, 2017, the U.S. ambassador to the African Union (AU) Commission announced that U.S. SOF would end its participation in counter-LRA operations by the end of April 2017.<sup>49</sup>

Despite these significant efforts to capture or kill Joseph Kony and defeat the LRA, the group remains a nuisance for central African governments and a daily threat to thousands of vulnerable civilians across four countries. The rest of this paper will discuss how the LRA has managed to survive for over 30 years.

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<sup>45</sup> “United States Africa Command 2017 Posture Statement ”; *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> “The Lord’s Resistance Army: The U.S. Response.”

<sup>47</sup> Elias Biryabarema, “Uganda says will withdraw troops hunting rebels in Central African Republic,” Reuters, June 10, 2016, accessed February 6, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-uganda-rebels-idUSKCN0YW1HE>.

<sup>48</sup> “US to end operations against Lord’s Resistance Army in Africa,” Deutsche Welle, 3/25/2017, accessed 3/29/2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/us-to-end-operations-against-lords-resistance-army-in-africa/a-38117991>.

<sup>49</sup> African Union, “U.S. Ambassador notifies that #USA Special Forces will end their participation in Counter-LRA Operations by the end of April 2017,” African Union Peace Twitter, March 29, 2017, accessed 3/29/2017, [https://twitter.com/AU\\_PSD/status/847064842670366720/photo/1](https://twitter.com/AU_PSD/status/847064842670366720/photo/1).

## Source of Resilience: Maneuvering Among Interconnected Conflicts

One of the key components of the LRA's resiliency is its deliberate maneuvering between and within four interconnected conflicts in Uganda and central Africa. The confluence of factors that impact these conflicts has made coordination to suppress the LRA very difficult.

The four conflicts are a **north/south Ugandan conflict**, an **insurgent conflict** between the LRA and central African governments, an **intra-ethnic conflict** within the Acholi community, and a **geopolitical regional conflict** between several major central African countries. We will discuss each of these in turn.

### North/South Ugandan conflict

The north/south conflict in Uganda is the LRA's *raison d'être*. This conflict is the result of foreign power interference and the historical marginalization of the Acholi people before, during, and after the colonial period. The LRA was among several insurgent movements that emerged during the 1980s, all of which can be seen as an extreme manifestation of the consequences of a disenfranchised north. Though the language used in the formation of many of these insurgent groups was rooted in local mysticism or religious symbology, the grievances that these groups sought to address were often tangible and legitimate, including inequitable development opportunities across Uganda.

This longstanding national conflict contributed to the resiliency of the LRA because it serves as a perpetually unresolved justification for the existence of ethnically distinct rebel groups in Uganda. Inequitable development in northern Uganda also served a practical role for the LRA's longevity once it was established, as Kony and his followers have been able to organize and move with ease in underdeveloped regions in the north.

## Insurgent conflict

The LRA has used insurgent and guerilla tactics against civilian populations, Ugandan government forces, and the AU Regional Task Force formed to counter the LRA. The LRA operates within an enormous territorial expanse with a relatively small number of combatants. This has allowed the LRA to avoid detection with ease and easily ambush lightly protected towns and villages before disappearing into largely uninhabited and undeveloped territory.

The LRA's use of guerilla and insurgent tactics, including ambush, intimidation of the local population, strategic withdrawal, use of heavily forested terrain, and foreign support, demonstrates a keen awareness and exploitation of its opponent's weaknesses. Uganda's underdeveloped north (where the LRA operated until 2006), combined with the Ugandan government's acrimonious relationship with neighboring countries (where the LRA operates today), has provided the LRA with time and space to develop proficiency in insurgent tactics that maximize its strengths as a mobile guerilla group, and exploit its opponent's weaknesses.

## Intra-ethnic conflict

Though, since 2006, the demographic base of LRA combatants has diversified via abduction to include non-Ugandan and non-Acholi rebels, Acholi nationalism has remained a cornerstone of LRA self-identity, with non-Ugandan rebels relegated to second-tier status.<sup>50</sup> Early in the conflict, however, the alleged championing of Acholi rights by the LRA quickly descended into violent retribution against Acholi towns and villages, which disproportionately suffered LRA atrocities.<sup>51</sup> Violence against the Acholi population began as retribution against what Kony saw as traitors within his own ethnic group, the mass majority of whom refused to aid Kony and rejected LRA violence. Attacking "traitorous" Acholi has since turned into an essential part of the LRA's self-identity, even though the LRA has not operated in Uganda since 2006.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> LRA, *Dominic Ongwen's Domino Effect*.

<sup>51</sup> Will Storr, "Tragedy in Uganda: Joseph Kony massacre survivors tell their stories," *The Guardian*, 12 January 2014, accessed 3/6/2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/12/joseph-kony-uganda-massacres-survivors-stories>.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

This intra-ethnic conflict contributes to the resiliency of the LRA because it has created a complex victim/perpetrator dynamic, whereby those who perpetrate atrocities are often simultaneous victims, either directly, by being forced to kill family members before joining the LRA, or indirectly, by taking part in the destruction of one's own ethnic group. Alienating a proportion of a specific ethnic group through the manipulation of a shared identity between victims and perpetrators, makes any attempts at re-integration of former LRA rebels extremely challenging. In addition to the risk of rejection by one's own community due to violence perpetuated upon joining the LRA, the psychological "buy-in" to the LRA from new recruits and abductees presupposes the necessity to purge Uganda of non-loyal Acholi. Overcoming these barriers to social reentry for combatants has shifted over time, with periods of high defection, which will be discussed below. Intra-ethnic conflict has, however, remained an important barrier to the reintegration of LRA combatants, and thus a source of resiliency for the LRA.

## Geopolitical regional conflict

A final contributing factor to the LRA's resiliency has been its ability to exploit its relationship with the countries in the region, specifically in the often fractious relationship between Sudan, South Sudan, and Uganda.

The relationship between the LRA and Sudan dates from 1994, when Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir provided guns and ammunition in exchange for LRA attacks on the South Sudanese rebels, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), and the Ugandan Army.<sup>53</sup> This relationship with Sudan has shifted over time in concert with Sudan's relations with South Sudan, with increased Sudanese support when negotiations between Sudan and South Sudan soured, and decreased support when political concessions appeared imminent.<sup>54</sup>

Regional power patronage has provided the LRA with one of its most significant survival tools: safe havens. When the LRA was forced out of Uganda in 2006, Sudan served as one location for its members to hide and recoup. The Kafia Kingi enclave—which is a disputed territory claimed by South Sudan but controlled by Sudan that borders the Central African Republic (CAR) Haute Kotto prefecture, South Sudan's Western Bahr el Ghazal State, and Sudan's South Darfur State—has served as a place

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<sup>53</sup> Ledio Cakaj, "Joseph Kony and Mutiny in the Lord's Resistance Army ", *The New Yorker*, October 3, 2015, accessed February 7, 2017, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/joseph-kony-and-mutiny-in-the-lords-resistance-army>.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.



of refuge for Kony and is currently where Kony is presumed to be hiding. In addition to being disputed territory, Kafia Kingi borders CAR, which has been experiencing civil war since 2012.<sup>55</sup> This fits the pattern of the LRA's concealment strategy, which focuses on using geography strategically and seeking refuge in sparsely populated areas of dense jungle, in either contested territory or border zones (or both). (See Figure 3.) Additionally, Kony reportedly ensures his own safety by staying in the middle of bush camps,<sup>56</sup> surrounded by scouts,<sup>57</sup> to ensure that he is the last to be attacked. A second location in which LRA groups are relatively undetected as they hide and move is the Garamba National Park in northeast DRC, a vast, isolated area known for rebel groups, poachers, and smugglers.

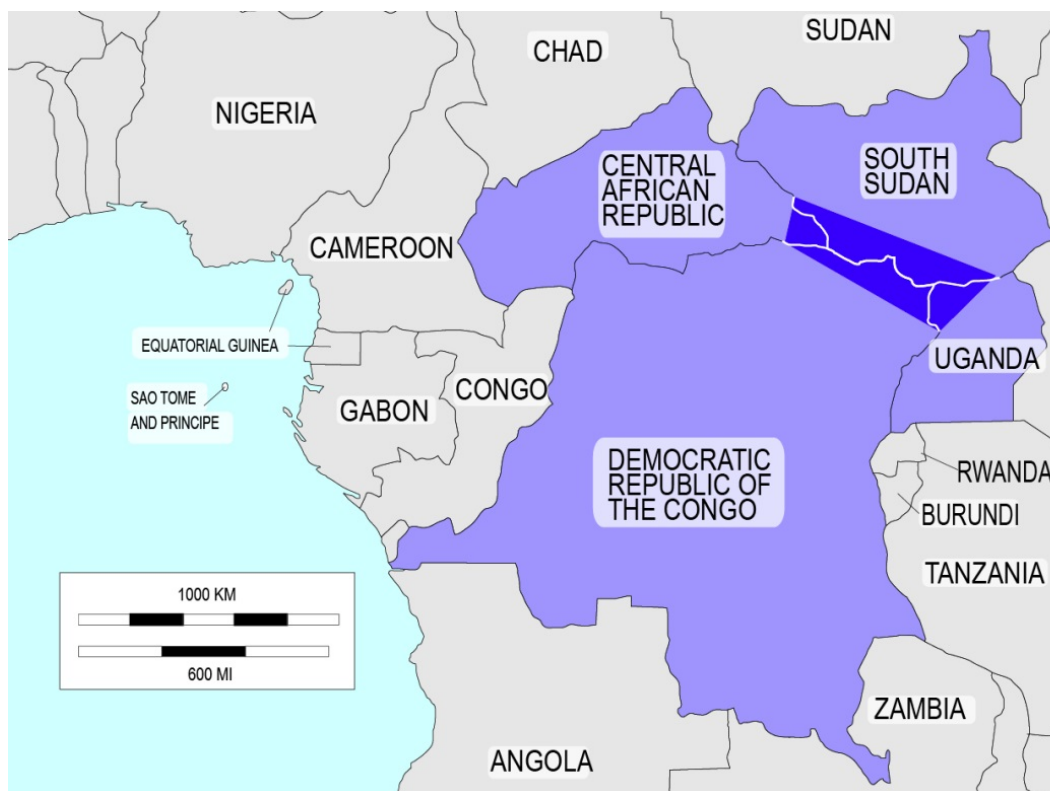
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<sup>55</sup> Nathalie Baptiste, "The Central African Republic's Forgotten Crisis," *The Nation*, September 11, 2014, accessed 3/26/2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/central-african-republics-forgotten-crisis/>.

<sup>56</sup> "Joseph Kony and Mutiny in the Lord's Resistance Army "

<sup>57</sup> Max Fisher, "Why is Obama Sending Troops Against the Lord's Resistance Army," *The Atlantic*, October 14, 2011, accessed February 7, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/10/why-is-obama-sending-troops-against-the-lords-resistance-army/246748/>.

Figure 3. Areas of LRA activity



Source: Michael Markowitz.

The shaded area indicates the border zone where the LRA is most active.

The LRA crisis has been sidelined domestically in several countries, for three reasons: the outbreak of civil conflict in CAR since 2012, and in South Sudan since 2013; the widespread unrest and electoral conflict in the DRC (see Figure 4 for more detail on these conflicts) and Uganda's signaled withdrawal from the AU Regional Task Force.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, geopolitical tensions between Uganda, the DRC, CAR, Sudan, and South Sudan inhibit coordination on a transnational level.

<sup>58</sup> "Uganda says will withdraw troops hunting rebels in Central African Republic."

Figure 4. Conflict in Central Africa

DRC	CAR	South Sudan
<p>There are multiple, ongoing conflicts in the DRC, including a political and constitutional crisis surrounding the postponed 2016 presidential election and apparent unwillingness of President Laurent Kabila to relinquish power. There is also ongoing rebel-led, resource-driven conflict, particularly in the North Kivu, South Kivu and Kasai provinces. There are dozens of active rebel groups in the DRC. A lack of legitimate governance on the national level has emboldened local militias and insurgent groups, including the FDLR, Mai Mai militias, the Kamuina Nsapu militia and the LRA.</p>	<p>A sectarian-based civil war broke out in CAR in 2012 when a Muslim-led coalition insurgent group, known as the <i>Séléka</i>, launched an offensive against the government. <i>Séléka</i> seized the capital Bangui in 2013, causing President François Bozizé to flee. The <i>Séléka</i> coalition split in 2014. There is ongoing fighting between ex-<i>Séléka</i> factions and the anti-Bakala militias, who are primarily Christian. The country is de-facto partitioned between anti-Bakala forces in the southwest and <i>Séléka</i> factions in the northeast. There is limited, if any, governance outside of the capital.</p>	<p>The South Sudanese Civil War began in 2013 when President Salva Kiir, an ethnic Dinka, accused Riek Machar, an ethnic Nuer who was the former president and Kiir's deputy, of an attempted coup. Fighting between the SPLM-IO (opposition) and the SPLM (government forces) led to several failed peace negotiations. Though a peace agreement was signed in 2015, the agreement collapsed and violence continues across the country. Rebel infighting is contributing to the ongoing instability, and the 2017 famine is exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.</p>

Source: Pamela Faber.

In addition, the widespread diffusion of LRA groups has resulted in increased LRA involvement in local conflicts. In CAR, for example, ex-Seleka factions began sending armed fighters to “respond” to LRA attacks in an attempt to undermine the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) forces, who struggled to respond to LRA attacks.<sup>59</sup> LRA groups have also established transactional relationships with local actors. As early as 2010, Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) stationed in South Darfur and Kafia Kingi introduced LRA combatants to traders, who visited LRA camps to purchase ivory.<sup>60</sup> LRA defectors have reported that the LRA has traded with the Sudanese Janjaweed, an

<sup>59</sup> LRA, *Dominic Ongwen's Domino Effect*.

<sup>60</sup> Ronan, *The State of the LRA in 2016*.

Arab tribal militia associated with the Sudanese armed forces,<sup>61</sup> and has informal relationships with several ex-Seleka commanders.<sup>62</sup>

These regional power dynamics contribute to the LRA's resiliency in several ways. First, they often relegate the importance of combatting the LRA to a second- or third-tier priority, given the significance of more immediate crises occurring in the countries involved. Second, they provide the LRA with opportunities for short-term alliances of convenience with regional and local powers that wish to use the LRA as a weapon against a rival. Third, they serve as a distraction from and cover for the LRA's mobile combatants, both when they are travelling from one strategic safe haven to another, and when they are hiding in one place, planning future attacks and recouping strength.

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<sup>61</sup> Ahmed Hussain Adam, "In Sudan, the Janjaweed Rides Again," *The New York Times*, July 16, 2014, accessed 3/24/2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/17/opinion/in-sudan-the-janjaweed-rides-again.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Ronan, *The State of the LRA in 2016*.

## Source of Resilience: Tactical Adaptability

In addition to successfully maneuvering within and among varied conflicts at a macro level, Kony and the LRA have adapted their tactics at a local level in accordance with changing circumstances. This demonstrates self-awareness within the LRA of its shifting capabilities and how they are best applied in new environments. Though the LRA's tactical adaptability usually results from reactive necessity rather than proactive innovation, changes are carried out with dexterity and skill, and have contributed to the resilience of the LRA. Our research identified three primary tactical adaptations that have contributed to the resiliency of the LRA.

### Defensive maneuver

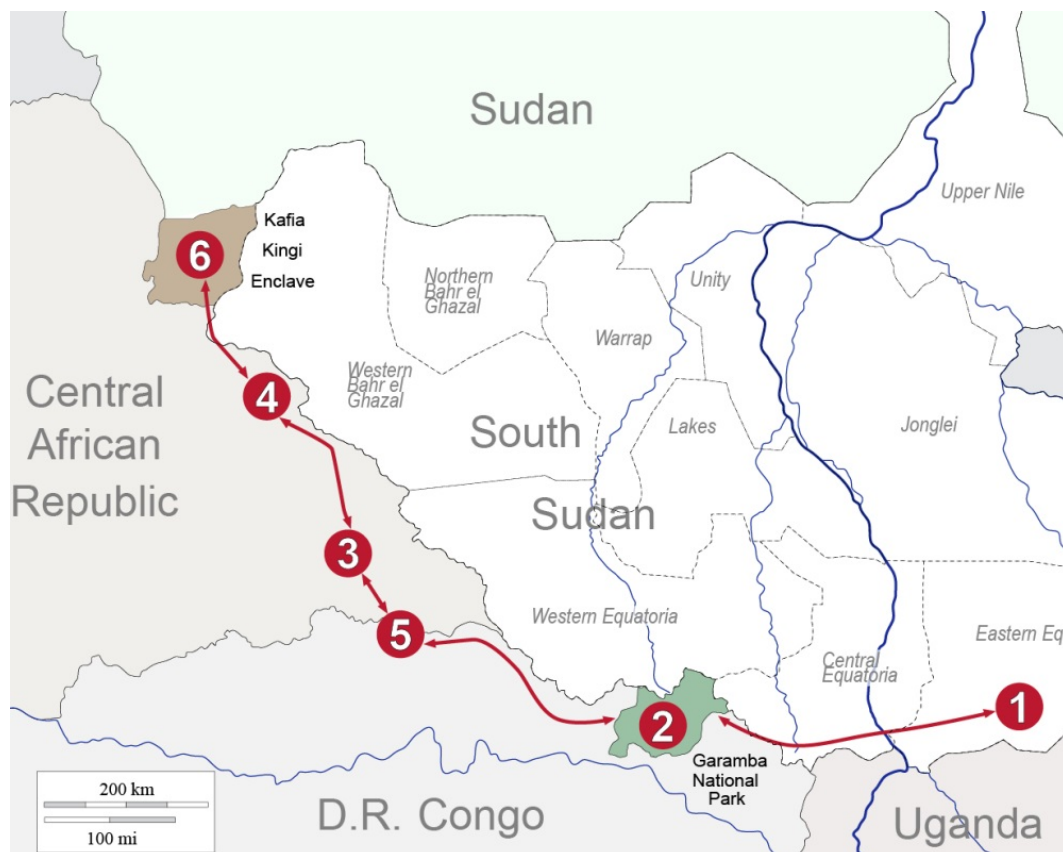
One significant tactical shift is increased use of defensive maneuvering (Figure 5). Since fleeing Uganda, the LRA has travelled thousands of kilometers across several countries. They often travel back and forth between heavily forested safe havens that preclude the use of overhead surveillance, and through sparsely inhabited areas of limited development.

Over time, the LRA has increasingly splintered and broken into small, mobile bands. Part strategy, part the result of defections and factionalism, the breakup of the LRA into several smaller groups renders the LRA increasingly difficult to target. All of its factions engage in tactical mobility, and Ugandan forces lack the resources that would be required to find every group of LRA combatants. Many of these groups may in the end consist primarily of low-value targets. For Kony, the cost of splintering is the near-total loss of communication, as military monitoring has forced LRA splinter groups to limit high-frequency (HF) radio and satellite phone communication in order to avoid discovery.<sup>63</sup> Since the LRA appears to prioritize survival over cohesion, this also raises the question of whether the LRA is a single force or more accurately described as a network of actors associating under the same brand.

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<sup>63</sup> LRA, *Dominic Ongwen's Domino Effect*.

Figure 5. The LRA's defensive maneuvering across Central Africa



Source: Created by Michael Markowitz (CNA) with data from the LRA Crisis Tracker.

From 2006 to the present, Kony and the LRA have traveled thousands of kilometers across multiple countries.

## Decreased abductions and civilian violence

The LRA has changed the way in which it interacts with local populations, by decreasing its abductions and moderating its violence against civilians in order to limit the negative backlash from both local governments and other rebel groups. The LRA has also diversified its contact with civilian populations from solely predatory interactions, to engagement in local trading networks. While there was an upswing in abductions in 2016,<sup>64</sup> there has on average been a marked decrease in abductions

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

since 2010.<sup>65</sup> Though the LRA does still abduct children, they do so less often and in fewer numbers. Some evidence shows that ongoing abductions avoid Sudanese women in order not to attract retaliation from the SPLA or the Sudanese government,<sup>66</sup> though the LRA has continued to abduct Congolese boys.<sup>67</sup>

One LRA defector revealed that his group received orders directly from Kony instructing them to avoid violently looting civilians.<sup>68</sup> Rather than using predatory behavior, such as village ambushes, on local population centers to gain supplies the LRA has increasingly relied on bartering for food and ammunition,<sup>69</sup> and attacking food convoys rather than villages.

This represents a shift in Kony and the LRA's previous "recruitment" strategy, which relied on the abduction of children who were routinely forced to kill their family members or friends in order to destroy any hope of a homecoming,<sup>70</sup> to one where the long-term abduction of children has decreased, and the temporary kidnapping of (adult) civilians is on the rise.

Not only has the LRA abducted fewer individuals from the DRC, CAR, and South Sudan over the past years, it has also released individuals that it abducted for a short period to use for specific, practical ends, such as to make them porters or traders. For example, in October 2016, 18 people were temporarily abducted by the Achaye splinter group to porter looted food toward LRA bush camps.<sup>71</sup> In another instance, in January 2017, LRA forces held two people hostage in CAR while a third person purchased supplies for them at the local market. The LRA then exchanged the hostages for the supplies.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ronan, *The State of the LRA in 2016*.

<sup>66</sup> Khristopher Carlson and Dylan Mazurana, *Forced Marriage within the Lord's Resistance Army, Uganda*, Feinstein International Center, 2008, accessed February 7, 2017, <http://fic.tufts.edu/assets/Forced+Marriage+within+the+LRA-2008.pdf>.

<sup>67</sup> Ronan, *The State of the LRA in 2016*.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> LRA, *Dominic Ongwen's Domino Effect*.

<sup>70</sup> "Joseph Kony and Mutiny in the Lord's Resistance Army "

<sup>71</sup> Invisible Children , "LRA Crisis Tracker Monthly Security Brief | October 2016," Invisible Children, 2016, accessed 3/8/2017, <http://invisiblechildren.com/blog/2016/11/10/lra-crisis-tracker-monthly-brief-october-2016/>.

<sup>72</sup> Invisible Children, "LRA Crisis Tracker Monthly Security Brief | January 2017," Invisible Children, 2017, accessed 3/8/2017, <https://invisiblechildren.com/blog/2017/02/23/lra-crisis-tracker-january-2017/>.

Despite obvious concern over the sudden increase in apparent long-term abductions in parts of 2016 and early 2017, this may be a sign of weakness for the LRA and an indicator of increased factionalism, rather than a demonstration of LRA resurgence. Most recent abductions have been carried out by splinter groups, presumably acting outside of or even against Kony's orders, with the possible intent of boosting their fighting capacity relative to Kony's group.<sup>73</sup> Though the LRA does still commit atrocities against civilians, the scale has greatly diminished. This should not be attributed solely to the LRA's relative weakness, but rather be seen as a purposeful and tactical shift for group survival in response to the expectations of other local rebel groups and government forces.

## Increased involvement in local criminal and smuggling networks

The LRA has become increasingly involved with networks of criminality and smuggling outside of Uganda. Specifically, the LRA has integrated itself into the illegal ivory trade<sup>74</sup> that runs through the DRC and CAR, and into Darfur.<sup>75</sup> Smuggling has allegedly been sanctioned by Kony himself. There is evidence that Kony has promoted officers who succeed in bringing elephant tusks poached from the DRC's Garamba National Park,<sup>76</sup> a remote, densely forested park roughly the size of Delaware. Park rangers reported that more than 170 elephants have been killed since 2014.<sup>77</sup> There are also reports that the LRA has trafficked gold and diamonds through CAR.<sup>78</sup>

Poaching elephants and trading in ivory and mineral resources may have begun as an opportunist means for LRA combatants to fund their activities while remaining semi-

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<sup>73</sup> LRA, *Dominic Ongwen's Domino Effect*.

<sup>74</sup> Bryan Christy, "How Killing Elephants Finances Terror in Africa," *National Geographic*, August 12, 2015, accessed February 7, 2017, <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/tracking-ivory/article.html>.

<sup>75</sup> "SECURITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ESTABLISHED PURSUANT TO RESOLUTION 2127 (2013) CONCERNING THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC," United Nations Security Council Subsidiary Organs, 07 March 2016, accessed February 7, 2017, <https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/2127/materials/summaries/entity/lord%E2%80%99s-resistance-army>.

<sup>76</sup> LRA, *Dominic Ongwen's Domino Effect*.

<sup>77</sup> "The Lord's Resistance Army: The U.S. Response."

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*



hidden by stepping into pre-existing smuggling routes. Since engaging in smuggling networks, however, the LRA as a group has shifted in a more fundamental sense from a rebel insurgent group focused on terrorizing civilians, to a group more closely aligned with criminality, poaching, and banditry.

These tactical shifts have demonstrated that the LRA is skilled at surviving and conforming to new environmental circumstances. The next section will highlight some of the LRA's biggest weaknesses given the tactical positioning they have been forced to assume.

## The LRA's Points of Weakness

Thus far this paper has addressed the two primary sources of the LRA's resiliency: its maneuverability between sub-national, national, and regional conflicts, and its tactical adaptability. This section demonstrates that while the LRA has skillfully survived repeated attempts to destroy it, it has not thrived under such pressured conditions and has major points of weakness.

### Defections

Throughout the history of the LRA, a cornerstone of Joseph Kony's strength has been his cult-like power and influence over his combatants. This was not only the result of the demi-god myths surrounding Kony's alleged immortality, but also because of the thorough, quotidian control that Kony held over how and when his combatants lived, ate, slept, married, and died.<sup>79</sup> This control has eroded over the past decade due to group splintering, internal paranoia, and waves of defections at both the foot soldier and commander levels.

A key part of the counter-LRA strategy has been targeted defection campaigns carried out by U.S. and Ugandan forces from 2011 to 2014, which succeeded in splintering Kony's command structure. Defection messages were delivered via leaflets, radio broadcasts, and loudspeaker announcements from helicopters.<sup>80</sup> In 2012, 80 percent of Ugandan male combatants who left the LRA surrendered voluntarily.<sup>81</sup>

One of the most significant recent defectors is Dominic Ongwen, who was captured by Kony as a child and spent his whole adult life within the confines of the LRA. In 2014, a group of Ugandan LRA officers, including Ongwen, began plotting to defect after years of poor relations with Kony, who, according to Ongwen, had prophetic visions that Ongwen wished to defect and refused to meet with him for over two

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<sup>79</sup> "Joseph Kony and Mutiny in the Lord's Resistance Army "

<sup>80</sup> "The Lord's Resistance Army is finally weakening in central Africa. This could dismantle it."

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

years.<sup>82</sup> In November 2014, another longtime LRA officer, Achaye Doctor, defected along with several other LRA fighters, leaving Ongwen behind. Suspecting that Ongwen was involved in the escape, Kony ordered him beaten and imprisoned. Ongwen later escaped with the help of sympathetic LRA fighters.

Ongwen is now facing 70 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court (ICC).<sup>83</sup> Though the pace of defections slowed considerably in late 2014 as military pressure on the LRA became less pronounced when over 1,000 AU troops were redirected to South Sudan to respond to the ongoing South Sudanese Civil War,<sup>84</sup> a second, bolder defection occurred in May 2015 when seven LRA bodyguards assigned to protect Kony attempted to assassinate him before escaping.<sup>85</sup> Soon thereafter, in January 2016, Kony executed an LRA commander who had killed a Sudanese trader, prompting another long-time bodyguard, Okot Odek, to defect.<sup>86</sup> On average, however, defections have decreased since 2014, following the Ugandan government's decision to prosecute former mid-ranking LRA officer Thomas Kwoyelo. The indictment of Ongwen by the ICC also disincentivized rank-and-file defections.<sup>87</sup> The question remains whether the impending U.S. withdrawal will trigger a new wave of defections, as combatants weigh what may be a final opportunity to leave the LRA through defection programs.

Achaye remains at large and has reportedly formed an LRA splinter group in the Bas Uele province of the DRC, which has begun abducting Congolese boys to strengthen its ranks, before relocating to CAR in 2016. This is the first time that a group has operated outside of Kony's control for an extended period of time without his express permission, and sheds light on the question of whether the LRA will continue to exist in some form without Kony himself but with the lessons learned from decades of resiliency and survival.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Moses Akena, "Ongwen speaks out on why he quit LRA," *Daily Monitor*, January 19, 2015, 2015, accessed 3/25/2017, <http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Ongwen-speaks-out-on-why-he-quit-LRA/688334-2593818-pdgo8vz/index.html>.

<sup>83</sup> LRA, *Dominic Ongwen's Domino Effect*.

<sup>84</sup> "The Lord's Resistance Army: The U.S. Response."

<sup>85</sup> LRA, *Dominic Ongwen's Domino Effect*.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> "The Lord's Resistance Army is finally weakening in central Africa. This could dismantle it."

<sup>88</sup> LRA, *Dominic Ongwen's Domino Effect*.

## The problem of succession

The issue of succession touches on a fundamental question for the future of the LRA: Will the LRA collapse with Kony's death or capture, or will it continue to function, as either a unified whole or as splintered groups, after Kony is gone? This question is increasingly pertinent as Kony ages, and rumors circulate that he is battling a terminal illness.<sup>89</sup> A primary consideration in answering this question is whether Kony has appointed a successor, and, if so, whether this successor will be accepted by other combatants. Though defectors indicate that Kony has been grooming two of his sons for a possible transfer of power, the question remains whether they will gain the loyalty of the other fighters, who allegedly resent their rapid rise in the LRA's ranks.<sup>90</sup> If Kony's sons (or another successor) successfully consolidate power through a purge, for instance, there will likely be a spike in abductions and violence after Kony's death.

However, since Kony's cult of personality has played and continues to play such an integral role in the cohesion of LRA fighters, it is rational to conclude that any attempted transfer of power will face a crisis of legitimacy. One likely outcome of this legitimacy crisis is the continued splintering of the LRA into increasingly smaller, largely leaderless, groups of combatants. Some combatants will use this opportunity to defect and return to their country of origin, while others will remain, either unwilling or unable to reintegrate into society. These groups, which will be geographically separate from one another, will likely become increasingly integrated into other rebel groups in central Africa, adopting local causes and grievances, and continuing to be a source of instability in the region. These groups will have one thing in common, however—the shared lessons of survival and resiliency learned from decades spent in the LRA. These lessons can spread not only among LRA splinter groups but also to other armed groups across the globe. The next section will discuss what other groups may learn from the lessons of LRA resiliency.

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<sup>89</sup> "Kony battling deadly stomach ulcers."

<sup>90</sup> LRA, *Dominic Ongwen's Domino Effect*.

## Implications for Other Armed Groups

The LRA provides a rich data set for what does and does not contribute to the survival of a rebel, insurgent, or armed group. These lessons in resiliency can be used not only by analysts and policymakers, but also by other armed groups. This section explores how other armed groups may integrate the experiences of the LRA into their own strategic planning.<sup>91</sup>

Six lessons that other armed groups can learn from the LRA are:

1. **A historically based grievance is a profound and lasting mobilization tool.** The LRA has relied heavily on the historical memory of ethnic violence, long after the majority of such violence in certain regions has been committed by a group other than the LRA. This tactic has paid dividends in its ability to bind combatants to each other, and isolate them from others. Other armed groups could mimic this tactic by focusing on aggrieved populations for support and recruitment, or basing their *raison d'être* on a verifiable, yet unaddressed, historical grievance.
2. **An armed group that can exploit regional geopolitical rivalries can choose among a variety of strategic, temporary alliances.** The LRA's resilience is partially the result of a nuanced understanding and manipulation of geopolitical dynamics. By leveraging Sudan's conflict with South Sudanese rebels and historically strained relationships with Uganda in order to gain

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<sup>91</sup> There are profound differences in ideology, goals, and tactics between the LRA and other armed groups in Africa, including African jihadist groups such as al-Shabab, Boko Haram, and AQIM. Understanding these differences is essential to combating these groups. The purpose of this section is thus not to belittle the difference between armed groups in Africa, but rather to draw attention to the possible transfer of survival skills from one group to another despite differences in ideological outlook or political goals. This transfer of knowledge may occur more readily between the LRA and armed groups with which it is in physical contact, such as ex-Seleka factions or Sudanese Janjaweed.

material support and safe havens, the LRA demonstrated a possible benefit of being a small player in regional power relations. Other armed groups can attempt to similarly position themselves between competing powers, or in contested territories.

3. **Moderate violence is a show of strength; excessive barbarity can be an invitation for defeat.** The LRA's use of barbarity has had mixed results for the group's survival. While the group's barbaric tactics, including child abductions, led to its ascension as one of the most feared rebel groups in central Africa, and padded its ranks with highly malleable forced-recruits, the barbarity of its tactics also led to an aggressive international response and semi-successful military campaign targeting its top leaders—even in the relative absence of strongly compelling international interests in the conflict. The group's recent decrease in barbarity may demonstrate an awareness of this trade-off. Other armed groups can look to and learn from the LRA experience to balance the benefits of disproportionate violence on building a reputation of power, with the associate risks of local or international response.
4. **A strong, charismatic, paranoia-prone leader becomes a symbol of strength that fosters loyalty and fear from followers, but also helps solidify a cohesive opposition.** Joseph Kony has become synonymous with the LRA due to the strength of his personality and the enduring nature of his leadership. While Kony has fortified the LRA through his leadership, his literal personhood has become so acutely associated with the LRA's survival that the question remains whether the group can outlast him. As a result, capturing or killing Kony himself, as opposed to killing all LRA combatants, has become the rallying call for many counter-LRA initiatives. Other armed groups can learn from this by attempting to foster strong leadership without allowing the death of a leader to foretell the death of the group.
5. **Adapting to new environments is essential but risks fundamentally changing the nature of the armed group.** Since 2006, and more significantly since 2010, the LRA has fundamentally changed its behavior from resembling an insurgent group, focused on carrying out ambush-style attacks on civilian and government forces, to a criminal group focused on banditry and smuggling. This shift has aided the LRA's survival, but arguably denuded the group of its former power and purpose, rendering the LRA a vestige of its former self. Other armed groups can view the LRA's transformation from insurgent to criminal group as an example of choosing survival over purpose or ideology, and compare their own goals against a similar choice in preparation for such an eventuality.
6. **A military victory is not needed if you can outlast your opponent's will to defeat you.** Despite its weakened state, the LRA is not yet defeated. Kony

lives, and the group continues to abduct, displace, and terrify civilians across multiple countries. The LRA's survival can—and likely will—again lead to growth if counter-LRA initiatives completely cease. As both U.S. and Ugandan forces have indicated a withdrawal from counter-LRA operations, an opportunity for growth for the LRA may soon materialize. If this occurs, it would be a strong indicator to other armed groups that survival by any means necessary—including taking actions which degrade a group to the point that opponents lose the will, desire, or justification to continue their offensive—is an effective way to appear non-threatening while in reality biding time and planning resurgence.

## Conclusion

The story of the LRA is one of transformation and survival. Though the LRA is no longer the group it once was, and its capacity to do harm has been degraded by counter-LRA operations, it still poses a serious challenge to stability in central Africa. The LRA continues to operate in several countries, where multiple LRA groups abduct civilians, and engage in violence, smuggling, and criminality. If counter-LRA initiatives are rolled back, the LRA may regenerate and continue to undermine U.S. interests in the region in the years to come.

Though Kony's death or capture will likely lead to increased splintering of the LRA into smaller groups, the LRA's current integration into local, regional conflicts and its transformation into a criminal, rather than an insurgent, entity highlight the group's adaptability and ability to survive in challenging new environments. Even if the LRA does cease to be a threat to central Africa in the future, however, its more than three decades of resiliency and survival can serve as a lesson for other armed groups in Africa and across the globe.

For the United States and its partners in the region, the LRA serves as an example of the difficulty and expense required to permanently defeat an adaptable and resilient armed group. Though counter-LRA efforts have been largely effective, the resources required to fully defeat the LRA, including capturing or killing Joseph Kony, exceed U.S. interest and willingness to engage. By disengaging, however, two risks remain: that the LRA will regenerate and grow in strength, and that other armed groups across the globe will look to the LRA as another example of how outlasting your opponent is a path to victory.



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