The Lord’s Resistance Army: A Profile

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Key Points

- The Lord’s Resistance Army is a terrorist organisation and active rebel group that has operated within Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and the Central African Republic.

- The LRA’s overall profile has undergone significant transformation over the last two decades, with its modus operandi, strength, overall fighting capabilities and support having changed since its formation.

- Although it is not as potent a force as it once was, it still has the ability to inflict violence and continues to be a destabilising force within the region.

- The recent decision of the United States to send military advisors to aid Uganda in eradicating the LRA has serious implications for the future of the LRA, the region and South Sudan’s newfound independence.

Summary

The Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) is a rebel group that has operated within Central Africa for more than two decades. It is responsible for Africa’s longest-running armed conflict. Originating in Uganda in the late 1980s, the group continues to inhabit and terrorise neighbouring states, including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic (CAR), and Sudan. While the group’s numbers and profile have declined in recent years, the decision by the United States in October 2011 to deploy 100 military advisors to Uganda in the hope of capturing or killing Joseph Kony, the LRA’s notorious leader, renewed
the spotlight on the mysterious rebel group. It is the largest deployment of US forces to Africa since marines landed in Liberia in 2003 and is a clear signal of intent that President Obama wants to put an end to Kony’s atrocities, which he has described as ‘an affront to human dignity.’ Whether the mission is successful or not, it will have serious implications for the future of the LRA and, more broadly, US geostrategic interests within the region.

Analysis

The Lord’s Resistance Army was formed in northern Uganda in 1987 by its enigmatic leader, Joseph Kony. The group followed in the footsteps of Alice Lakwena’s Holy Spirit Movement, a millennial rebellion against the then newly-appointed Ugandan Government. Like Lakwena, Kony was supposedly aggrieved about the underdevelopment of his Acholi homeland in northern Uganda and the suffering of his people at the hands of the government of President Yoweri Museveni. Finding it increasingly difficult to attract recruits by 1988, Kony turned to the practice of forcing young men and women to fight for the LRA. This practice quickly lost the LRA any popular support it might have enjoyed in northern Uganda.

Early campaigns were limited to Kony’s homeland, but the following years saw the group’s forces grow and its reach extend into neighbouring countries, including Sudan, the DRC and the CAR. By 1994, things were looking bleak for the LRA, which had suffered a number of losses at the hands of Ugandan Army offensives. It is widely believed that, at the time, Kony was prepared to agree to a peace deal put forward by an Acholi politician, Betty Bigombe.

Not long afterwards, Kony found new support from the Sudanese Government. Khartoum began sponsoring the LRA in retaliation for Ugandan support of the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army, or SPLA, the southern Sudanese forces in rebellion against the northern government. The Sudanese armed forces provided bases for the LRA in Southern Sudan, as well as ammunition, guns and military training, in exchange for LRA attacks on the SPLA.

Sudanese support, widely believed to be a continuing lifeline to the often-struggling LRA, officially ended in 2005, with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between North and South Sudan. The supposed cessation of support, in concert with increased military pressure, including a number of joint US-Ugandan military missions, fractured the LRA, which is now scattered into many small groups operating in the DRC, South Sudan and the CAR.

Kony and many of his officers are wanted for various counts of war crimes, including crimes against humanity. So far, however, Kony has yet to be brought to justice. With its propensity for violence, the LRA continues to terrorise civilians and abduct children to act as soldiers. It remains a potentially destabilising force within the region, especially in South Sudan.
Profile

The LRA has undergone significant change over the last two decades. Originally formed as a syncretic Christian militant group, the organisation’s profile, including its modus operandi, strength and fighting capabilities, strategy, troop movements, leadership and support base have all changed over time.

Ideological Base and Modus Operandi

Opinion is divided as to the ideology and purpose of the LRA. The group was apparently formed in an effort to regain the state power it lost when Museveni took over as president in 1986. Indeed, several manifestoes released by the rebel group underline this aim and point to it being founded in order to address the growing grievances of the Acholi people. Many commentators have rejected this claim, however, arguing that these grievances are merely a front for a reign of terror. Indeed, a report titled *Pushing the Envelope*, submitted to the UN in 2002, has claimed that the group ‘has no political wing’ and ‘lacks any clearly formulated political objective.’

Additionally, the group has received much media attention for its bizarre religious motives. Kony himself has previously declared that he ‘will use the Ten Commandments to liberate Uganda’ and has often portrayed himself as a demi-god who follows the commands of spirits only he can hear. This cult-like religious base initially offered a useful framework for compensating for the relative lack of military capabilities, although the religious aspect diminished somewhat as the group became more organised. By 1999, Kony had transformed himself from a leader with mystical powers to a military commander with religious beliefs, but it is now widely believed that many within the LRA no longer believe in Kony’s claimed supernatural powers. Although Kony claims that the LRA will one day retake Uganda, with those in the LRA becoming officers in the national army, today the group appears to be a personal vehicle for Kony’s survival, rather than a force fighting for legitimate political goals.

Strength and Capabilities

Estimates by the Ugandan Government, and interviews with former LRA fighters, indicate that there are now only around 400 LRA fighters left. They are operating in Sudan, the CAR and the DRC, although these numbers do not include women, children and abductees used to carry food and other materials. This is a far cry from its peak in 1999, when it was believed that the LRA had in excess of 4,000 troops; it is half the number that was in action just three years ago. Although the LRA continues to attempt to recruit through raids on towns and the kidnapping of youths to serve as young soldiers, it is widely believed to be at its weakest point in 15 years as a result of a series of military campaigns by the Ugandan Army.

This weakening of its forces has also seen its composition change drastically. Whereas formerly the group was primarily made up of Ugandans, the number of Ugandan fighters

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today is at an all-time low and there has been a slow but steady defection in recent years. As many of these fighters have either died or defected, the LRA now heavily consists of Congolese, CAR and Sudanese fighters. The group, primarily armed with automatic machine guns, such as Chinese-manufactured AK-47s, still possesses the means to kill and terrorise en masse. The LRA possesses high-tech communication devices, such as laptops, satellite phones, digital radios, and even GPS monitors, which have aided LRA groups to communicate with each other and evade capture.

In terms of its fighting style, the LRA has changed little over the last two decades. In many regards, it is not dissimilar to other terrorist organisations. It tends to avoid direct contact and targets civilians almost exclusively.\(^2\) Tactics such as the burning of villages, rape, mutilation and abduction still inspire terror and a fearsome reputation, despite the organisation now being limited to a few hundred troops.\(^3\) Thus, although the LRA’s strength and capabilities may be declining, it remains a highly feared force within the region.

**Strategy and Movements**

The LRA once operated as a highly centralised organisation controlled by Kony and his commanders. In the aftermath of Operation Lightning Thunder, a joint Ugandan, Southern Sudanese and Congolese military offensive in 2008-09, the group splintered into five main groups. The Ugandan Army has since forced the LRA to fragment into even smaller cells. This has meant that Kony no longer has direct control over every LRA group, as each is now largely controlled by one of his subordinates. These groups now operate within Southern Sudan, Congo and the CAR. The groups also vary greatly in their numbers. Some are as small as 20-30 individuals; others, such as Kony’s group, are believed to be 120 strong, with at least 80 being fighters. These LRA groups are constantly on the move as they are pursued by the Ugandan Army, making them particularly hard to track down.

The LRA’s continued presence in the DRC enables cross-border activity into the CAR, South Sudan and, potentially, a route back to Uganda via Garamba National Park in the north-eastern DRC.\(^4\) Indeed, the LRA’s activity demonstrates a commitment to maintaining the option of returning to Uganda, although some groups are now more than a thousand kilometres from Uganda. As noted above, Kony has maintained that the LRA will one day return to Uganda and overthrow the Museveni Government. The LRA’s activity further north, in the CAR, aimed at potentially linking up with the Sudanese Armed Forces, is a troubling sign that support from Khartoum may have continued in return for the LRA destabilising the newly-independent republic of South Sudan.

**Support Base**

Although a violent force in Uganda, it was not until 1994 – after it received support from the Sudanese Government – that the LRA became a regional problem and an even greater destabilising force. Khartoum provided weapons, ammunition, training and bases in return for LRA attacks on the SPLA and Ugandan Army. Many officials believe Kony has visited


Khartoum more than once. According to one Ugandan official, ‘Kony had an official residence in Juba town [now the capital of South Sudan]... he was a respected military officer like any of the Sudanese military officers.’ That support waned in 2001 after the LRA was recognised as a terrorist group by the US, but resumed a year later. Support officially ended in 2005 when the government of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement with South Sudanese rebels. Kony may well be trying to re-establish contact with the Sudanese Armed Forces in order to get backing once again and has continued to link up with SAF elements.

There is no proof that Sudan continues to support the LRA, although airdrops and communication between the two have been unofficially reported. Certainly, Khartoum has, in the past, enjoyed the LRA’s destabilising presence within the south. Given South Sudan’s fragile independence, Khartoum may once again benefit from a continued LRA presence there. Regaining support from Khartoum remains a key objective for Kony. Without Sudanese support, there are few options left for the LRA, whose strength and capabilities have gone hand in hand with support from Khartoum. Without securing vital resources and a safe passage into northern Sudan, there is not much Kony can offer his troops. Faced with such circumstances, defections will likely continue and the LRA may well cease to exist, in its current form at least.

### Recent US Involvement and the Future of the LRA

President Obama’s recent decision to send 100 military advisors to Uganda in the hope of dismantling the LRA underlines the growing strategic importance that Sudan and the East Africa region hold for the US. It could have serious implications for the future of the LRA. Explaining the decision, President Obama declared that the advisors are there to eradicate the ‘atrocities across the CAR, DRC and South Sudan that have a disproportionate impact on regional security.’ For several decades, the LRA has been a destabilising force in the region. It was a situation that suited Khartoum as it waged war in the South and the Darfur region.

The removal of Kony may renew hopes that security conditions within the region will improve and South Sudan may not become a failed state as some have warned. Moreover, the decision might also be viewed as military payback for the quiet sacrifices Ugandan troops have made in Somalia. It may free up Ugandan troops to continue fighting in the Horn of Africa, where piracy and the spread of militant Islam remain of concern to the US. Critics have suggested that the decision may also be motivated by Uganda’s newly-discovered oil and its proximity to resource-rich countries such as the DRC. If the US is able to assert itself within the region, it may be able to better compete with China’s growing influence while shoring up resources for the coming decades.

Regardless, the decision to send military advisors into Uganda in the hope of eliminating the LRA may well mark the end of the line for Kony. Kony and the LRA have escaped US-led attacks before and have largely eluded the Ugandan Army. But the LRA is a shadow of its former self and, with its ever-dwindling numbers and relative lack of resources, may well

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encounter more defections. It could face relative obscurity, even if the US cannot successfully capture or kill Kony in the near future. Perhaps the only means of survival left for Kony is to regain the support of Khartoum. But, Khartoum’s abandonment of the LRA when Washington classified it as terrorist organisation in 2001 and the renewed US presence within the region, will likely deter Sudan from once again supporting the LRA, officially at least.

**Conclusion**

The Lord’s Resistance Army has terrorised Uganda and much of Central Africa for over two decades, although its troop numbers now appear to be dwindling. While the LRA may be in decline, the elimination of Joseph Kony and his forces is an important strategic objective for the US and regional powers alike. Though the LRA has limited numbers, it continues to disrupt the region and cause instability in neighbouring countries, especially South Sudan.

If the LRA can be stamped out, South Sudan’s fragile independence may well be bolstered and security conditions in the region including areas of South Sudan, the CAR, the north-eastern DRC and northern Uganda may improve. Moreover, should the LRA cease to exist, Ugandan troops would be freed up to fight al-Shabaab forces in Somalia, where piracy and terrorism continue to be pressing issues.

Whether Kony can be captured, or even killed, remains to be seen, although with the LRA’s current splintered nature and limited troop numbers, the US might well find more success than on previous missions. Should Kony finally be eliminated or brought to justice, the chances of peace within the region and, especially, the fragile new state of South Sudan, will be significantly enhanced.

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