

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

VOLUME XVII, ISSUE 11

p.1

Brian M. Perkins

BRIEFS

p.3

Farhan Zahid

TTP's Future Under the Leadership of New Emir Noor Wali Mehsud

p.5

Brian Perkins

Evaluating the Expansion of Global Jihadist Movements in Mozambique

p.7

Animesh Roul

Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Reinvigorating East Turkistan Jihad

IRAQ: US-IRAN TENSIONS INFLAMING DIVISIONS ALREADY BEING EXPLOITED BY ISLAMIC STATE

Brian M. Perkins

Tensions between the United States and Iran have continued to escalate in recent weeks amid concerns regarding the persistence of Islamic State (IS) fighters in Iraq. IS cells had remained in Iraq despite the country declaring defeat over the group in December 2017, and their numbers have almost certainly increased significantly following the fall of Baghouz and subsequent exodus of remaining IS fighters. The group is already exploiting divisions amongst Iraqi civilians and Iraqi security forces and continued US-Iran tensions could only fuel the divisions.

IS fighters are particularly active in Nineveh and other northwestern regions of Iraq but have conducted attacks much further from the Syrian border, including in Kirkuk, which experienced a series of six bombings that killed three people on May 30 ([Rudaw](#), May 30). IS has quietly been rebuilding its smuggling networks. They are operating in plain sight as well as out of remote caves, emerging to conduct bombings, kidnappings, and more

recently, to set crops on fire.

Continued attacks by IS have deepened internal divisions and suspicion among neighbors, particularly in areas that were once IS strongholds where people suspect each other of retaining allegiance to the group. Similarly, the attacks have raised concerns regarding the effectiveness and priorities of Iraqi security forces. Various communities claim that the military or local militias responsible for the security in their area are not protecting their interests due to ethnic or sectarian differences, particularly in disputed areas. For instance, the Kakai Kurds have accused the Federal Police and Army of ignoring IS crop burnings near Kirkuk and in Nineveh ([Kurdistan24](#), May 30). While it is unclear if all of the fires have been set by IS, the group has claimed responsibility for crop fires in the 183rd issue of its weekly newsletter, *al-Naba* ([Jihadology](#), May 23). In addition to tensions and divisions between official Iraqi forces and minority communities and those in disputed territories, there are also sharp divisions among the more informal security forces. Many of the diverse militias that provide security in Iraq are those aligned with Iran, and they are being drawn into the ongoing spat between the United States and Iran.

Already in a precarious position, Iraq is finding itself in a position between the United States and Iran that could have serious implications for its own internal security. On May 15, the United States withdrew personnel from Iraq due to the alleged threat of Iran-backed militias attacking U.S. personnel. Just days later a rocket reportedly struck the Green Zone about a mile from the U.S. Embassy. Though it is unclear where the rocket was fired from or who was responsible, suspicion has fallen on Iran-backed militias. Whether this is the case or not, incidents like this only deepen divisions between U.S.-aligned groups and Iran-aligned groups while inflaming tensions on a broader scale. With the volatile environment, U.S. corporations have also begun withdrawing personnel, a move that could burden local workers and cause anger within local communities. While the government is attempting to remain neutral, even offering to mediate between the United States and Iran, militias will only become more entrenched as the spat continues and local civilians are likely to experience the brunt of the impact. With IS already exploiting inter-security and inter-community tensions, further local and global divisions will only create additional opportunities for the group.

Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

LOCAL VS. GLOBAL—AL-QAEDA'S STRATEGY FOR SURVIVAL

Brian M. Perkins

Islamic State (IS) continues to dominate headlines around the world for the rebranding of its official branches, the Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka, and its expansion in Africa, but it is still imperative not to lose sight of al-Qaeda and its long-term strategies for survival and growth. While IS has shifted its operations to portray itself as a more global organization, al-Qaeda and its branches have shifted from prioritizing expansion and targeting the West to maintaining and building its affiliates on a much more local level, and still managing to instill anti-Western sentiment. Unlike IS, al-Qaeda has also seemingly selected partners that provide a more diverse local network as well as increased longevity.

The localization of al-Qaeda's efforts can be seen in the tactics and composition of almost all of its affiliates. While Islamic State continues working to create loose ties to fledgling jihadist groups across the globe, al-Qaeda is focused on shoring up its roots in the territories it has long operated—and it is working. Al-Qaeda is very much alive, and while not seeing significant expansion beyond its traditional areas of operation, it has still managed to persist and in some cases, grow, despite the tendency of pundits to downplay its strength in the face of IS.

This shift toward local insurgencies is particularly evident when looking at al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), long considered to be among the group's most potent branches and the most significant threat to the West. AQAP and the late Anwar al-Awlaki were the pioneers of the lone-wolf tactic, encouraging any able-bodied person to carry out attacks against the West through its English language magazine, *Inspire*. While al-Awlaki's death, as well as the death of the editor of *Inspire*, Samir Khan, undoubtedly created a setback for the group's Western outreach, there was a conscious tactical shift toward a more local approach that occurred outside the context of these deaths. It is, however, also a sign of the leadership's mentality and foresight to avoid spreading itself too thin and to focus on what has worked for the group in Yemen—focusing heavily on hyperlocal issues and rallying recruits against known local enemies rather than abstract, distant ones.

In Africa, AQIM has similarly focused more heavily on local issues, growing organically by absorbing local groups, which provide them more longevity as well as ethnic diversity. AQIM brought Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM—Group of Supporters of Islam and Muslims) into its fold in March 2017 (See [Terrorism Monitor](#), April 21, 2017). JNIM was a merger of Ansar Dine, the Macina Liberation Front, al-Mourabitoun and the Malian branch of AQIM, effectively drawing together leaders from key ethnic groups and tying itself to local communities. In doing so, al-Qaeda has ensured a partnership that will likely extend for generations. JNIM has seen significant growth over the past several years, gaining a foot-hold in Burkina Faso and Niger with the threat increasingly spreading west.

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda has maintained its incredibly tight partnership with the Taliban, and through the Taliban's surge over the past few years, is once again operating throughout the country ([Tolo News](#), May 21). There has been very little written on al-Qaeda's continued operations in Afghanistan, largely due to its lack of public claims or operations that draw attention to itself. This tactic has allowed the group to remain under the radar as coalition forces focus more heavily on the burgeoning Islamic State-Khorasan group, which has conducted spectacular attacks against US and Afghan forces. Meanwhile, prospects of peace talks with the Taliban raise concerns over the group's relationship with al-Qaeda and the implication of a troop withdrawal. While IS has entered its new global phase in an attempt to preserve itself, al-Qaeda remains firmly within a more local phase to strengthen its networks and persist, as it has for well over a decade. This local phase has kept the West out of the group's crosshairs for some time, but it is almost certain that at some point, when its ranks are shored up, the group could pivot back from the near enemy to the far enemy.

Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

Sectarianism, Salafism and the Latent Terror Threat in Saudi Arabia

Andrew Devereux

Introduction

On April 23, 37 individuals were killed in state-mandated executions across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, each accused of terror-related crimes; at least 33 of those killed were Shia Muslims ([Arab News](#), April 23). The individual charges have not been released, with officials only offering vague platitudes, such as accusing the individuals of adopting indeterminate extremist ideologies.

Two days prior to the executions, four Sunni jihadists armed with automatic rifles and unsophisticated explosives attempted to besiege a government facility in al-Zulfi, approximately 155 miles north of Riyadh ([Al-Arabiya](#), April 21). Videos shared via social media showed the neutralized bodies of the attackers lying near their vehicle. Three police officers were wounded during the incident. Despite the attack being largely unsuccessful, with minimal casualties or damage, Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for the incident via its news agency Amaq ([Al-Araby](#), April 22).

The Salafist-Saudi Relationship

Historically, Salafism-Wahhabism—the strict interpretation of Islam with a focus on orthodox practices which underpins IS' ideology—has been interwoven within elements of the Saudi community. Saudi state-level conservatism and embedded socioeconomic and cultural factors help provide a potential path to jihadism. Although this is a simplistic summary, as radicalization is a complex and non-linear phenomenon, the 3,000 Saudi nationals who traveled to Iraq and Syria are an embodiment of the potential for radicalization in the Kingdom. Additionally, IS has had a clear interest in expanding jihadism in Saudi Arabia since its inception. For IS leadership, the Kingdom's close relationship with the United States is an example of how the monarchy is an 'apostate' regime, fraternizing globally with 'kafirs' (unbelievers). Locations such as Medina and Mecca have a hugely symbolic attraction for IS. As bastions of Islam, a

caliphate with Mecca at its heart is the ultimate jihadist fantasy.

The al-Zulfi attack was principally ineffective, but the IS claim of responsibility indicates a multi-faceted motivation. Primarily, the attack was a piece of propaganda. The claim of responsibility is a reminder to both the global and domestic community of the group's nascent presence in Saudi Arabia and is consistent with IS' current transition from a proto-state to a regional insurgency.

The targeting pattern and execution method follows the modus operandi of recent IS attacks, as leaders are encouraging near-sighted attacks against Middle Eastern regimes. Fostering instability and feeding off the results is a core strategy of IS in its current incarnation. This has been reinforced by the re-emergence of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a video recently released by Amaq. Reassurance that Baghdadi is alive is enough to solidify support amongst IS' followers and ensure local jihadist groups are receptive to Baghdadi's messaging, including in Saudi Arabia ([Middle East Eye](#), April 29).

Sectarian Tensions

Saudi Arabia's recent history has been punctuated by sectarianism between the Sunni majority and the Shia minority community. In 2015, IS claimed an attack on a Shia mosque in Qatif governorate which killed 21 ([Saudi Gazette](#), May 23, 2015). Sowing sectarian discord in the Kingdom has long been on the IS agenda. The Shia community is primarily concentrated in the Eastern Province, and reports of Shia extremism in the area have been frequent in recent years.

As seen through the execution of the 33 supposed Shia terrorists, the government is quick to brand any acts of Shia aggression as terrorism, however negligible the offense. Shia-led terrorism is largely linked to domestic grievances, such as perceptions of marginalization and discrimination. Attacks have been consistently linked to criminal activity rather than to an embedded ideological stance—frequently, those accused of Shia terrorism have significant criminal records ([Asharq Al-Awsat](#), April 8).

The majority of attacks target Saudi security personnel or sites in Eastern Province, with attackers eschewing more indiscriminate actions. These groups have no apparent links to international groups, but the government

is quick to claim Iranian influence—a potential rise in sectarianism is a small price to pay for further geopolitical points scoring against Iran.

The Saudi Response

Following the executions, Saudi Deputy Defence Minister, Prince Khalid bin Salman, reiterated the Kingdom's commitment to combating terrorism ([The National](#), April 25). Policies are in place to deter domestic radicalization. One element of the Vision 2030 program is to clamp down on online radicalization, while the controversial re-education prisons remain operational ([The Journal](#), December 3, 2017). Critics have claimed these facilities, ostensibly advertised as terrorism rehabilitation clinics, are used as detention sites for government critics incarcerated on spurious terror charges.

The executions themselves are more than just geopolitical brinkmanship, as they act as a deterrent to both Sunni and Shia extremists. Despite the worries regarding returning fighters—over 760 are known to have returned—the General Intelligence Presidency (GIP) has significant networks, domestically and abroad, to monitor suspected terrorists and prevent high-impact attacks. In 2017, King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud announced that the domestic intelligence and counterterrorism apparatus would be consolidated into a new state security agency, placing homeland defense within the remit of the monarchy ([Gulf News](#), July 21, 2017). Despite concerns from international partners over the ramifications of this move, the Saudi security forces remain some of the most sophisticated and capable in the Middle East.

The IS goal of a caliphate with Mecca at its center is utopian, and further away now than at any point since the group's creation. The security forces have proved adept at tracking returning fighters and ensuring no significant IS cells can form in Saudi Arabia, even in the most remote areas with minimal state governance. There is little indication that many of those who have returned remain operational.

IS leaders would have to send a significant amount of resources to Saudi Arabia to establish a significant and practical presence. Sectarian tensions are evident, but the group does not have the bandwidth necessary to extensively exploit the divides. The al-Zulfi attack is a reminder that small IS factions remain committed to conducting operations, but Saudi Arabia retains the ca-

capacity, networks and, perhaps crucially, support of Western administrations, to nullify any significant domestic expansion of organized Sunni or Shia extremism.

Andrew Devereux is an Associate Analyst in Counter-Terrorism at Healix International and HX Global, focusing on terrorist incidents, actors and the wider MENA region. He holds an MA in Global Security Studies, during which he focused on the impacts of the War on Terrorism and the geopolitical rationale behind US arms distribution. Prior to his work on counter-terrorism, Andrew worked as political and security threat analyst, focusing on the Americas.

Rising Threat of Radicalization in Kerala and Connections to Sri Lanka

Brian M. Perkins

Aside from a branch of fighters in the restive region of Jammu and Kashmir, India has largely been spared violence at the hands of fighters belonging to, or aligned with, Islamic State (IS). Similarly, many of the once potent terrorist groups operating in India have largely been dismantled in recent years. The country does, however, have its fair share of IS sympathizers and individuals who have traveled abroad to fight alongside IS in Syria and Iraq. Indian security forces have mostly managed to foil attacks plotted by IS sympathizers across the country over the past year.

During IS' recent rebranding and string of announcements regarding new *Wilayat* (provinces), the group announced the formation of *Wilayat al-Hind* in May following an attack in Jammu and Kashmir. Perhaps the most shocking recent development regarding IS in India, however, is the revelation of tentative connections between radicalized individuals in Kerala State and the culprits behind the deadly Easter Sunday bombings in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

IS Connections and Radicalization in India

India has long struggled with a variety of terrorist organizations throughout the country, with groups adhering to a wide range of ideologies from radical Islamist groups to militant communist and Maoist groups. The relationship between Indians and IS has been relatively insignificant when compared to other countries in the region when looking at the per capita number of individuals who have travelled to join the group or the presence of official affiliates. IS, however, has gained a foothold in Jammu and Kashmir through local militants who pledged allegiance to IS, ultimately becoming Islamic State in Jammu and Kashmir (ISJK), an offshoot of the larger Islamic State-Khurasan (ISK) which at the time was primarily based in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Outside of Jammu and Kashmir, however, there are not any areas as largely affected by armed violence and very few pockets of Indian Muslims adhere to more strict

forms of Islam that fall in line with IS ideology. Although Muslims are a considerable minority in India, comprising around 13 percent of the population, it is the second largest Muslim community in the world. Given this fact, the number of foreign fighters, which is estimated to be in the low hundreds, is a very small fraction of the country and there is no indication of a rapidly growing support base. There are, however, a few worrisome trends that have developed in Kerala over the past several years.

Kerala police stated in 2017 that they believed upward of 100 individuals had joined IS in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria ([India Today](#), November 11, 2017). Among the 100 were reportedly five families from Kerala who joined IS in Afghanistan in 2016. Additionally, militants hailing from Kerala have also been identified as fighting alongside ISJK, suggesting links not only to IS branches outside of India but also those far closer geographically. The cause for the disparity between the number of Keralites radicalized compared to those from more northern states is hard to pin down to a single cause, but among the reasons reported by Kerala police and locals are historical links to Gulf states and the high percentage of migrant workers subjected to a more conservative brand of Islam in the Gulf and even in the Maldives. Upward of 90 percent of Kerala's emigrants travel to the Gulf, 38 percent to the UAE and 22 to Saudi Arabia.

Along with the high number of migrant workers has come an influx of remittances, accounting for a third of the state's economy, and a steady rise in Salafist mosques and madrassas. The areas that historically had the highest number of emigrants and the largest rise in Salafist mosques and madrasas, such as Malappuram, Palakkad and Kasaragod, are also among the areas that have seen the highest number of foreign fighters and terrorism related arrests ([First Post](#), June 21, 2017). Similarly, over the past several years they have also seen the most significant return of emigrants, despite remittances still rising, suggesting a higher than normal return of individuals exposed to a more conservative brand of Islam that more closely corresponds with that of IS ([News Minute](#), February 9). According to accounts by locals, many spread their newfound conservatism to their families, neighbors, and disenfranchised youth. The return of a large number of emigrants has also placed significant stress on the economy. Meanwhile, there has been a more concerted effort by IS to recruit from southern India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives through

propaganda published in Malayalam and other regional languages.

Sri Lanka – India Connection

In early May, Sri Lankan Army chief, Mahesh Senanayake, reported that some of the suicide bombers responsible for the Easter Sunday attacks had recently traveled to Bangalore, Kashmir, and Kerala for training or to make links with local groups. Meanwhile, India's National Investigation Agency raided the homes of several individuals in Kerala, including Riyas Aboobacker from Pallakkad. Riyas had reportedly been following the speeches and videos of the mastermind of the Sri Lankan attacks, Zahrán Hashim, for more than a year and was in contact with individuals who had traveled to Afghanistan and Syria ([Economic Times](#), April 29). Riyas was also allegedly in the early stages of planning his own attack in Kerala.

It is unclear which of the bombers traveled to India and the exact nature of their trip but Kerala and Jammu and Kashmir are the most likely locations in which they might have found partners. Kerala was also placed on high alert after being warned that 15 alleged IS-inspired militants had left Sri Lanka and were bound for the Kerala coast ([Times of India](#), May 25). The growing trend in Kerala has prompted the state's police to establish its own Anti-Terrorism Squad to tackle rising fundamentalism and terrorist activity ([The Hindu](#), May 28).

These revelations, along with the fact that India warned Sri Lankan authorities before the attack, indicates the possibility of an interconnected (even if only loosely) network that links militants from Jammu and Kashmir—where IS does have more solid ties—to Kerala, Sri Lanka, and beyond. These nascent connections coupled with links to foreign fighters as well as familial and migrant ties to Gulf states and the Maldives raises concerns over the possibility for more cross-coordination between recruiters, propagandists, and would-be terrorists.

Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

Has Islamic State Really Entered the Congo and is an IS Province There a Gamble?

Sunguta West

As it lost control of key regions in Iraq and Syria, Islamic State (IS) may have found a foothold in the conflict-ridden Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

In April, IS claimed responsibility for two attacks on villages in eastern DRC, a region beset by rebel violence and the Ebola epidemic. On April 18, the militants claimed an attack on Kamango, a village near the town of Beni. Several soldiers were allegedly killed or wounded in the attack in the village near the Congo's border with Uganda. The group claimed responsibility for the attack through its propaganda channel, the Amaq news agency ([Business Focus](#), April 19).

In another statement, the militant group claimed responsibility for another attack on an army base in the village of Bovata in the Beni area. Three soldiers were allegedly killed in the attack and scores of civilians injured. The group used the alleged gains to announce the formation of the new Central Africa Province of the Caliphate. The group reportedly planted its flag in the area ([The East African](#), April 19).

IS' claims have not been independently verified, but analysts say their presence cannot be ignored given the many local militias operating in the region. The region is devastated by years of rebel insurgencies, and some of the old rebel groups could be giving IS an opportunity to export and expand its conflict to Central Africa.

IS has already made in-roads into North, East, and West Africa through local affiliates. An insurgency, linked to its factions allied to the northern Nigeria Islamist militant group Boko Haram, has been unfolding around Lake Chad. Multiple IS-linked militant groups have spread around the Sahel region of West Africa, and now in Central Africa in the DRC. Recently, actions linked to IS factions have been recorded in Somalia, the base of al-Qaeda's affiliate in East Africa, al-Shabaab ([Terrorism Monitor](#), January 25).

When IS claimed the attack in the DRC, it appeared to have completed a circle of footprints over the vast

African continent. However, some analysts have disputed IS claims. They see it as an attempt by the group to portray itself as an international jihadist group.

Some government officials said the attack on the villages exhibited features of those carried out earlier by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). ADF is a shadowy Islamist rebel group that has fought the DRC and Ugandan governments for decades ([The East African](#), June 19, 2018).

In early April while he was in Washington, DRC President Felix Tshisekendi said there were links between ADF and IS, and announced that he had joined the war against IS ([The Nilewires](#), April 19).

According to reports, the group had also received financial support from at least one IS financier ([The East African](#), April 19).

Background

The ADF, which is viewed as a Ugandan Islamist militant group, was founded around 1995 with the aim of overthrowing the Ugandan government and replacing it with one led through Sharia (Islamic law). Since then, it has been entrenched in the North Kivu region of the DRC near the Ruwenzori Mountains close to the Ugandan border ([Uganda Radio Network](#), December 26, 2013; [Daily Monitor](#), August 6, 2015).

Gradually, the group appears to have changed its interests to focus on the struggle for Islam. Until recently, its members included Muslim fighters who had been forced out of Uganda, but the membership appears to have shifted to include recruits from the wider East Africa region. Also, recent reports indicate that the group has been seeking attention from international terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and IS.

According to the Congo Research Group (CRG), an independent research organization on the Congo, the ADF had been attempting to establish links with IS in recent years. ADF reportedly rebranded and acquired a new name—Medina wa Tawhid wal Muwahdeen (MTN) or the City of Monotheism and Monotheists. It had also adopted symbols similar to those of international jihadist groups ([Congo Research Group](#), November 2018).

ADF was founded by Shaykh Jamil Mukulu, a Ugandan who converted from the Roman Catholic Church to Islam. Mukulu, born as David Staven, was known to be an

ardent critic of Islam when he was a Christian. Converting to Islam, Mukulu quickly became a hardline Islamist following his exposure to Tablighi Jamaat teachings. Tablighi Jamaat is a missionary movement of Islam that urges Muslims to return to a certain practice of Islam, focusing on dress ritual and behavior.

Mukulu is believed to have spent time in Khartoum, where he met Osama bin Laden, the former al-Qaeda leader, and other Islamist militant leaders who had sought refuge there.

Some reports suggest Mukulu received extensive training in Sudan and Afghanistan following his encounter with Bin Laden, although this has not been confirmed. Regardless, this prepared him to form and lead an Islamist outfit that has remained resilient despite continued operations by the Congolese army and UN forces in the DRC.

Mukulu is now in prison in Kampala after he was extradited to Uganda following his arrest in Tanzania in 2015. He faces several charges including terrorism, murder, crimes against humanity, aiding and abetting terrorism, among others ([New Vision](#), April 30, 2015; [Uganda Radio Network](#), July 20, 2018).

Circumstances around the ADF's formation can be traced to the actions of Ugandan Muslims in the 1990s. At that time, Ugandan Muslim groups were fighting for control of the powerful Nakasero Mosque in Kampala.

Both the Tablighi sect, which Mukulu belonged to, and Uganda's national Muslims umbrella organization, the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC), wanted to be given the control of the mosque. After a struggle in the courts, the Supreme Court handed the institution to the UMSC, an action that left the sect's members disgruntled. The sect leaders felt the government had favored the UMSC and launched a series of protests, violently occupying mosques.

In 1991, the group attacked UMSC headquarters at the Aghan Khan Mosque, killing a number of people including policemen and dogs who came to restore order. Mukulu was at the forefront of the violence and was arrested with other members of the Tablighi sect in the ensuing government operation.

While in prison, Mukulu continued to spread radical Islam while mobilizing for a rebellion. As a result of his actions, a radical group named Uganda Muslim Free-

dom Fighters (UMFF) was formed in prison. One by one, as the members were set free, they would sneak to a training in a camp in a valley in the Buseruka area in western Uganda.

In 1994, the army raided their camps after a series of attacks, robberies, and kidnappings in Uganda. Hundreds of the Islamists were arrested in the operation, but a large number escaped into the DRC, where they took refuge in the Beni area and in the eastern parts of the DRC.

With UMFF's arrival, then DRC President Mobutu Sese Seko advised all anti-Uganda groups to form a united front that he could support. This gave rise to the ADF ([Daily Monitor](#), August 5, 2015). Mobutu, as well as the Sudanese Islamist, Hassan al-Turabi, allegedly provided support to the group during its early stages. Another key supporter was deposed Sudanese President Hassan Omar al-Bashir ([Daily Monitor](#), April 22, 2019)

In 1995, the ADF joined with the National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (NALU), an armed Ugandan movement in the DRC. NALU was fighting for the autonomy of a region known as Rwenzururu near the Congo. Around this time Mukulu was released from prison and snuck into the DRC, becoming the ADF-NALU's spiritual leader and top military commander.

With Mukulu at the helm, the militants were blamed for increased attacks in eastern DRC and Uganda. There were reports indicating that the group had gained more strength after aligning itself with al-Shabaab, the Somalia-based al-Qaeda affiliate in East Africa. Observers had mentioned seeing al-Shabaab fighters among ADF-NALU militants. They also served as organizers of the attacks ([New Vision](#), January 3, 2013).

Violence has escalated since 2014, with several high-profile attacks. On December 7, 2014, ADF-NALU was blamed for the killing of 36 people in the village of Oicha near Beni in North Kivu Province. The group also allegedly massacred more than 250 people in North Kivu Province over 16 separate incidents between October 2 and December 7, 2014. The attacks followed similar unsophisticated patterns that continue to this day, with assailants arriving at night slaughtering women and children.

Conclusion

Although IS' claims that it executed an attack in the DRC and established the Central Africa Province in the Congo has not been independently verified, its claims cannot be ignored given the many local militias operating in the war-torn country.

While existing rebel groups could provide IS an opportunity to expand its presence in Africa, its growth in the DRC is likely to be limited in the short term due to a variety of factors.

The chances that the ADF, IS' alleged affiliate, would take control of the region are quite slim. The ADF is largely a poorly equipped and formless militia operating in a region where many other armed actors hold control over the country's territory and immense mineral wealth. It has also been a key focus of both the Ugandan and Congolese forces. Given these factors, it is likely that IS may just be trying to boost its ego and project strength after losing its territory in Iraq and Syria.

Sunguta West is an independent journalist based in Nairobi.