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The Kampala Attacks and Their Regional Implications

The Islamic State has claimed two suicide bombings in the Ugandan capital Kampala. In this Q&A, Crisis Group expert Dino Mahtani unpacks what happened and assesses the threat of further such attacks in East Africa.

What happened and who is allegedly involved?

On 16 November, a trio of [suicide bombers](#) targeted Kampala, Uganda's capital city, one detonating his vest outside police headquarters and two more blowing themselves up near parliament. The attacks killed at least [four](#) other people, according to official reports, and wounded 37 more, 27 of whom were police officers. As the city reeled from the blasts, security forces hunted down a fourth bomber in north-western Kampala, shooting him before recovering his suicide vest. The police said they had recovered more explosive materials from a safe house the fourth attacker was using in a nearby suburb and were continuing to track other possible members of the "terror groups". In a [statement](#) later that day, President Yoweri Museveni said the attackers were tied to the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a rebel group that emerged in Uganda in the early 1990s and later fled into the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Its resurgence in the DRC since 2013 has been marked by the killing of thousands of civilians.

Hours after the president's statement, the Islamic State (ISIS), which now counts the ADF's largest faction as one of its affiliates, [issued its own communiqué](#) via its media agency Amaq, claiming the attacks as its handiwork. ISIS said the attackers were all Ugandan foot soldiers of its so-called caliphate. In recent weeks, the jihadist group and the ADF have been linked to a spate of bombings in public spaces in Uganda. On 8 October, ISIS said it was behind a reported [bomb attack](#) against a police station in Kampala. It then claimed responsibility for an [explosion](#) in a speciality pork restaurant and bar on the city outskirts on 23 October, which killed one person. Days later, a [suicide bomber](#) blew himself up on a bus on the way to the DRC border, injuring a few passengers. Ugandan officials said he was part of the ADF. Earlier in 2021, authorities say, the ADF was also involved in a [failed bomb plot](#) targeting a Ugandan general's funeral and a [failed assassination](#) attempt directed at a government minister.

A main suspect in some of the bomb plots, according to Ugandan security officials who have spoken to Crisis Group, is a Ugandan individual, Meddie Nkalubo (known in ADF circles as "Punisher"), who is based in an ADF camp in the eastern DRC from where he coordinates cells in Kampala and elsewhere. In June, UN investigators working under a Security Council mandate covering the DRC [reported](#) that several ADF ex-combatants had identified him as the operator of a drone the ADF used in combat against the Congolese military, as well as an important bombmaker for the group. An ADF ex-combatant who worked for him and who has been interviewed by Crisis Group explained that Nkalubo is also an important disseminator of ISIS propaganda and instructional videos to cells not just in Uganda but elsewhere in the region.

In the aftermath of the attacks, Ugandan security forces have deployed large numbers of troops and police and put up several new checkpoints across Kampala. As of Friday morning, police [say](#) they have arrested at least 34 people, including six children, who are allegedly connected to the ADF, and have recovered more explosive materials as part of ongoing raids. They say they have killed at least four suspected ADF operatives who were crossing into a Ugandan frontier town facing the DRC. They have also shot dead a Ugandan Muslim cleric, [Muhammed Abas Kirevu](#), at his home outside Kampala. The police say he was an ADF recruiter and was killed after allegedly trying to escape while police tried to escort him into a patrol car. His family have described his killing as "cold blooded murder". Meanwhile, authorities say they are hunting down another cleric, Suleiman Nsubuga, suspected of recruiting and training fighters, and providing them materials to make bombs. Rights activists have [voiced concerns](#) that a broader crackdown could translate into heavy-handed repression which could enable militant recruitment.

How has the ADF evolved while affiliating itself to Islamic State?

Originally composed of both Christian and Muslim fighters, the [ADF began](#) as an alliance of rebels seeking to oust President Museveni's government. Its insurgency was routed by Ugandan troops in the mid-2000s, forcing it to flee to the eastern DRC, where it classed itself as an armed Islamist group. Although its activities are centred in the DRC, the ADF recruits heavily in Uganda, where it draws upon a wellspring of discontent among Ugandan Muslims, who make up [roughly 14 per cent](#) of the population according to official estimates. Some Muslims [accuse](#) authorities of religious discrimination, as seen in particular in mass roundups of young Muslims after high-profile security incidents.

For a time, the ADF appeared to have faded away in the DRC, but it has rebounded significantly since 2013, when it embarked on what would turn into a years-long spree of killing civilians and attacking security forces. The group became increasingly active in the run-up to national elections then slated to take place in 2016. During that period, it developed [alliances](#) with other local militias and armed groups opposing the state, plus, reportedly, with officers in the [DRC's army](#), while also taking sides in various local intercommunal disputes, all of which together created fiendishly difficult and bloody conflict dynamics for Kinshasa and the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC to have to bring under control. By the beginning of 2017, however, the ADF had petered out in the group's stronghold of North Kivu province, as it faced supply and finance shortfalls following a period of intensive pressure from the DRC military. The ex-combatant interviewed by Crisis Group said food supplies were scarce until at least March 2017, after which the group began to recuperate again.

The ADF's resurgence from 2017 coincided with a closer association with ISIS. The group appeared to have established [links](#) with Waleed Zein, a Kenyan national now in custody in his home country and [sanctioned](#) by the U.S. for his alleged role as a financial conduit between ISIS and the ADF. It also welcomed into its ranks another fighter known as [Jundi](#), whom ADF ex-combatants identify as a Tanzanian national and the man who first brought the ISIS flag to ADF camps. In April 2019, ISIS claimed its first attack in the DRC, carried out by the ADF. Musa Baluku, leader of the group's largest faction, now appears to be a self-proclaimed ISIS devotee. In a 2020 video seen by Crisis Group and referred to in a [report](#) from George Washington University, he stated that the ADF "ceased to exist a long time ago", adding that he and his fighters, numbering several hundred, were now part of ISIS. A rival faction, made up of no more than dozens of people loyal to Baluku's predecessor, Jamil Mukulu, now in custody and on trial in Uganda, is considered by DRC's security officials to be only a minor threat.

Since 2020, Baluku's group has also started moving north from its heartland in North Kivu into [Ituri](#) province, where violence involving predominantly ethnic Lendu militias has been escalating since 2017. DRC and UN officials say the ADF's movement in this direction was spurred partly by renewed military operations launched against the group in North Kivu in October 2019. Since entering Ituri, the ADF has attempted to expand its collaborator network in the province. It has tried to recruit from among ethnic Hutu migrants who have settled in large numbers in Ituri's south and are at odds with other local communities. Some of the latter community leaders have at times helped the DRC's army track down the ADF. A ["state of siege"](#) declared by the DRC's President Félix Tshisekedi in May, placing provincial authority in North Kivu and Ituri in military hands, has so far failed to stem the ADF's continued expansion and deadly attacks.

Baluku's faction appears meanwhile to have benefited from an influx of foreign fighters and advances in its deployment of improvised explosive devices (IED) and use of drones. DRC security officials and the former ADF combatant interviewed by Crisis Group noted that the group has since 2018 absorbed more foreign fighters, including from Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania and Kenya, and also gave combat training to Mozambican al-Shabab insurgents from Cabo Delgado as late as that year. UN investigators also stated in a [June 2021 report](#) that "the involvement of ADF combatants from outside the Democratic Republic of Congo contributed to modest advancements in improvised explosive device construction techniques", listing Burundians, Kenyans and Tanzanians as especially important to that development. The investigators cited an uptick in the ADF's deployment of such devices on the battlefield, although many of the bombs are still rudimentary and fail to detonate. They also documented the group's use of at least two surveillance drones in support of combat operations.

DRC authorities are meanwhile investigating whether a [Middle Eastern](#) individual they arrested in September at a location close to ADF camps in North Kivu is affiliated with ISIS in any way. The man was reportedly travelling on a Jordanian passport. After they arrested him, officials in Kinshasa say, they found drone management and bomb-making instructional materials as well as jihadist propaganda among his possessions. They have provided no evidence supporting this claim, however.

How does this all relate to other jihadist threats in the region?

The attack in Kampala comes as officials in other East African countries have begun to raise the alarm, warning of a possible surge in plots involving not just ISIS and its affiliates, but also Somalia's Al-Shabaab movement, which swears allegiance to al-Qaeda. Al-Shabaab has conducted major

attacks in [Kenya and Uganda](#) over the last decade or so.

In early October, authorities in Rwanda, next door to Uganda, announced that they had arrested thirteen individuals involved in a failed plot to detonate explosives in public spaces in the capital Kigali. Some of the suspects were allegedly found in possession of bomb-making equipment, including wires, nails, dynamite sticks and phones. Rwandan officials had told Crisis Group prior to the Kampala attack that they had obtained evidence that some of those arrested were in communication with Nkalubo. They said it was proof that the plot was connected to the ADF. One of the arrested suspects has reportedly [stated](#) that the plotters were looking to punish Rwanda for its [military intervention](#) in Cabo Delgado, where its troops deployed in March in support of government efforts to stem the al-Shabab [insurrection](#) that ISIS has also claimed as its affiliate in 2019.

Kenyan and Tanzanian authorities meanwhile report observing the return of significant numbers of their nationals who have served in militant groups abroad. Over the last few years, both countries had clamped down on domestic [jihadist networks](#) connected to Al-Shabaab in Somalia. These networks recruited from pools of disillusioned youth in Kenya's north and along the Indian Ocean coast. Some of those youth fled the crackdowns, especially after 2017, and moved to the ADF or Mozambique's al-Shabab, where they have been influenced by ISIS propaganda. Following foreign military intervention in Cabo Delgado, security sources say, many of these Kenyan and Tanzanian fighters, the latter of whom have occupied senior positions in al-Shabab, are retreating home.

These fighters' return via Tanzania has coincided with other significant developments. In August, a [lone shooter](#) embarked on a killing spree near the French embassy in the main city of Dar es Salaam. Tanzanian officials are close-mouthed about his origins. Somali intelligence sources, however, say the man was a former member of Somalia's Al-Shabaab who travelled to Mozambique in 2020 to join militants there. Sources close to the ADF, meanwhile, say the arrested Middle Eastern man mentioned above, prior to crossing into the DRC, had also stopped for nearly two weeks in August in the Tanzanian town of Kigoma, where he may have provided training to East African nationals. Immigration data, seen by Crisis Group, proves his presence there, although Crisis Group has not been able to independently confirm he provided training.

In the last few weeks, Kenya's security services have issued a number of warnings, including in an official memorandum that was leaked in late October, that both ISIS and Al-Shabaab are looking to unleash fresh attacks along the Kenyan coast. One official told Crisis Group that Al-Shabaab would likely want to compete with ISIS for headlines if it learned that the latter was plotting new operations.

What are the prospects for the Islamic State's growth in the region?

In March, the U.S. [designated](#) the ADF and Mozambique's al-Shabab as branches of ISIS. It stopped short, however, of recognising these groups as constituent parts of the Islamic State in Central Africa Province, the core group's preferred name for what it would still like to present as a caliphate with wholly integrated outposts. While fighters from both theatres of war have undoubtedly mingled, they are still pursuing local battlefield objectives under separate chains of command. DRC and Mozambican authorities, however, are worried that ISIS may try and channel more assistance to both of them. Meanwhile, it is claiming ever more attacks committed by the ADF and Mozambique's al-Shabab on its media channels.

Independent financial investigators and regional authorities confirm that they have identified the transfer of hundreds of thousands of dollars from at least one cell in Kenya to ADF-affiliated individuals in the DRC and Uganda, as well as to unknown persons in Tanzania and Mozambique. Kenyan officials say they are investigating whether the money is connected to ISIS. If the global jihadist group is behind the transfers, it could indicate an attempt to reinforce not just the ADF and al-Shabab, but also the associated networks proliferating IEDs throughout the region.

In the meantime, another ISIS faction seems to be playing a role in the development of both the ADF and Mozambique's al-Shabab. Al-Shabaab North East (ASNE), a small ISIS faction based in the mountains and coastal areas of north-eastern Puntland facing the Gulf of Aden, has for years built up a reputation as an important trafficker of arms and explosive materials into Somalia via associated clans. One of its commanders, Mohamed Ahmed ["Qahiye"](#), is known by UN investigators and Somali intelligence sources to have travelled to Mozambique in 2020 via Ethiopia to provide training to fighters there. A document seen by Crisis Group dated April 2020 and recovered by security forces from militants in Mozambique also shows their leader reporting battle progress to ASNE. The ADF ex-combatant interviewed by Crisis Group stated that Nkalubo was also in touch with the Puntland faction.

Security officials in Mogadishu and Puntland's capital Garowe express particular concern about ASNE. It has come under sustained military pressure from both Puntland security forces and Al-Shabaab units in the area, hemming in its movement. Still, it continues to resist and, those officials fear, may use its strategic location facing Yemen to bring in more weapons and fighters, and try to expand and project more influence in Somalia and further afield.

What should regional authorities and their partners do?

The latest attacks in Kampala reinforce the need for governments across the region to tackle what appears to be a multidimensional threat straddling national boundaries. While Ugandan authorities are preoccupied with the latest security operations in the wake of the horrific attacks, they must in the longer term ensure that their responses do not translate into indiscriminate roundups. Security forces must also try and prioritise arrests over shoot-to-kill operations. A heavy-handed approach may simply play into the hands of the ADF, helping it recruit at a time when national political tensions are also simmering after [contested elections](#) earlier this year.

Authorities in the DRC and Mozambique need to reduce opportunities for ISIS to finance the groups operating there. In the DRC, Crisis Group has already [advocated](#) that the government and UN peacekeeping mission work more closely with communities in ADF-afflicted areas, resolving disputes among them and drawing upon their local knowledge to develop military operations that target the ADF core more precisely. The group's fighters would be more likely to demobilise if they come under more effective military pressure while also losing any local support they may have garnered. In [Mozambique](#), Crisis Group has pushed the government to complement military operations by deploying the millions of dollars of aid money it has received. The spending is urgent and should be paired with confidence-building dialogue with locals who could help persuade Mozambican militants to defect.

Regional authorities from the Horn of Africa, East Africa and southern Africa also need to come together to cooperate more intensively to interdict and dismantle transnational support networks connected to the ADF, Mozambique's al-Shabab and international jihadists operating across boundaries. Rwandan and Ugandan security services do not cooperate at present, due to tensions between them, as [previously documented](#) by Crisis Group. A number of Kenyan and Tanzanian officials have also told Crisis Group that intelligence cooperation between their countries is not as free and open as it should be. Meanwhile, Maputo's security and judicial authorities have yet to receive details of suspected ISIS-related financial transfers that have been flagged in another country in the region and which also partly relate to Mozambique. Insufficient cooperation among countries in the region is likely a boon for militants that increasingly operate across those countries' borders.

ecoi.net summary:



Kampala: Article on 2 suicide bomb attacks on 16 November 2021, killing at least 4 persons and injuring at least 37 more; officials tied the attack to the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) rebel group while Islamic State (IS) group claimed responsibility for it

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