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ISLAMIC STATE CENTRAL AFRICA PROVINCE: REBRANDING OR COOPTING OF ADF FACTION; TERRORISM MONITOR VOLUME: 17 ISSUE: 21

Islamic State (IS), somewhat shockingly, announced the formation of Islamic State Central Africa Province (IS-CAP) nearly seven months ago on April 18, expanding the group's presence into the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) ([The East African](#), April 19). Details regarding the size or demographics of its forces are murky, but evidence indicates ties to the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), one of the country's most bellicose militant groups. Many analysts believed the announcement portended a drastic shift in the security environment, but the operations claimed by IS-CAP seemingly indicate that it has only coopted a small faction within the ADF, or that there are only a handful of ADF fighters aligned, or in communication, with IS.

In terms of IS-CAP's claimed attacks, there has been very little divergence between the scale, targets, and tactics used by the new group and the ADF, with attacks remaining unsophisticated and no obvious signs of increased capabilities. There is also an obvious overlap between the group's area of operations and the ADF's historical strongholds in DRC's North Kivu province. These facts should not be interpreted as the whole of ADF aligning with IS. IS-CAP's diminutive propaganda output is similar to that of other nascent IS branches and affiliates where the group has seemingly only attached its banner to a local group instead of successfully rebranding or recruiting and building a significant network of loyal IS combatants.

In many cases, new IS provinces have grown out of dissident or alienated factions of well-established militant groups, which is likely the case with IS-CAP. Where there is a difference, however, is that there was not a public pledge of allegiance to the now deceased IS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, prior to the group being formally recognized as an official IS province. This has typically been the case for many new IS provinces, including in Sinai and Afghanistan/Pakistan. The lack of a public pledge and limited release of propaganda and claims of responsibility make it exceptionally difficult to discern IS-CAP's strength or leadership structure, as well as how it fits in with the amorphous ADF and the plethora of other militant groups operating in the region.

IS-CAP has only claimed a small fraction of the attacks compared to the number of attacks attributed to ADF. The disparity could have several explanations, including challenges local fighters might face with communicating operations back to central IS for inclusion in formal IS propaganda channels. Several noteworthy attacks, however, have been attributed to ADF fighters that IS would surely be inclined to claim—even if the claim was significantly delayed—if their fighters had in fact been involved.

The security landscape has notably declined in North Kivu over the past year, with hundreds killed and the violence threatening to worsen the ongoing Ebola outbreak in the region. The decline, however, can hardly be attributed to the emergence of a new IS branch alone as other militias, known locally as *mai mai*, have also been responsible for violence against civilians, health workers, and security forces ([Al Jazeera](#), May 9). On October 31, the government launched a large-scale operation against the ADF while also citing the presence of countless other militia groups operating in North Kivu. The operation comes after the military has strengthened its troop presence in the area and sought external military help from neighboring countries such as Uganda and Tanzania ([The East African](#), October 24). The operation is unlikely to be of a scale needed to do more than marginally disrupt the militants present in the region, but it will likely help reveal further information regarding IS-CAP, whether through evidence uncovered by the military or through any claims IS-CAP makes regarding counter-attacks on DRC forces.

At present, there is no indication that the ADF, as a whole, is rebranding as IS-CAP or that it is entirely aligned with IS. Some segments of ADF have historically held more jihadist inclinations than the group, as a whole, projects. One of these groups likely became IS-CAP and is serving dual purposes, with operations still aligned with the overarching strategies of the ADF but with an eye toward an IS-inspired end state. It is apparent, at this stage, that IS-CAP has established some sort of foothold. A resounding difference exists, however, between IS having coopted a faction and it successfully rebranding an entire militant organization. IS-CAP could recruit from a myriad of militias and armed groups in the region, but ADF remains the most plausible as many of the armed

groups are not motivated by jihadist ideologies. For now, the strategic calculus remains much the same as there has yet to be a seismic shift in how the insurgency is proceeding. However, the military must remain assertive because the simple fact that an IS branch—regardless of size—does exist in DRC can help draw outside financing and recruits in a way that the ADF brand could not.