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“Survival Mode”: Rebel Resilience and the Lord’s Resistance Army

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ABSTRACT

To date, scholarly work on armed groups has seldom considered the notion of rebel resilience, or the factors that enable these groups to survive despite time, military pressure, and the myriad contingent events of civil war. In an effort to develop an explanatory framework for resilience as a distinct outcome of civil war and rebellion, this article examines the conditions under which the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) has persisted for nearly three decades. Based on fieldwork and original research, the article explains the LRA’s resilience in light of the group’s organizational structure and resource self-sufficiency, which have been well suited for the borderlands of East and Central Africa. The LRA is a key case of rebel resilience. It is important because it sheds light on the organizational foundations of armed groups, the relationship between resources and rebellion, and the broader study of conflict duration and termination. Understanding the sources of the LRA’s resilience can inform efforts to end such insurgencies.

KEYWORDS



conflict duration;
conflict termination;
insurgency; Lord’s
Resistance Army;
Uganda

Introduction

In early 2015, African Union (AU) forces stationed in the Central African Republic (CAR) took Dominic Ongwen into custody after ex-Séléka fighters found him wandering through the bush. Ongwen was a strongman for the infamous Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), which for nearly three decades has carved a path of violence and disorder through East and Central Africa. Led by the enigmatic Joseph Kony, the group has killed more than 100,000 civilians and has displaced hundreds of thousands more across five countries. Ongwen, a former child soldier, rose through the LRA ranks committing atrocities that earned him 70 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court, which he now faces.¹

At first glance, Ongwen’s capture exposes the glaring vulnerabilities of an armed group hemmed in by the African Union Regional Task Force (RTF) that hunts it. While formidable in the past, the LRA is now a threadbare non-threat from a conventional military standpoint.² With the group’s numbers estimated at around 200, it is only a shadow of what it once was, as attacks and abductions have steadily trended downwards for several years.³ By some accounts the group’s organizational cohesion is under strain, with Kony’s control weakening over far-flung sub-groups, particularly since Kony imprisoned Ongwen for challenging his authority.⁴ A new LRA faction under a “Doctor Achaye” now operates independently in CAR,⁵ which indicates group fragmentation and possible demise.

Viewed another way, Ongwen’s two decades with the LRA reflect a distinct resilience. Violence has fallen in the aggregate in recent years, but fighters from myriad factions still

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pose a tangible threat as they loot and harass civilians, upend livelihoods, and penetrate surprisingly deep into CAR.⁶ Traveling long distances by foot daily in Sudan's *Kafia Kinji* region, Kony evades detection while his fighters stay scattered between CAR and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). As such, the LRA survives as a collection of semi-autonomous units in sparsely populated peripheries that put up no resistance. Most LRA members rely on a combination of low-level predation and "transactional" trade in cash and kind just to acquire basic supplies.⁷ At times the group has been a small-time player in the sub-region's illicit ivory and gold markets.⁸

Contemporary LRA watchers describe the group as operating in "survival mode," where its organization and behavior only narrowly ensure an inconspicuous existence.⁹ These observers, however, tend to restrict this view to the group's state of quasi-hibernation at play since AU troops and U.S. Special Forces have pursued it in the hinterlands of central Africa. Yet the noticeable decline of LRA operations during this period only papers over the group's remarkable resilience in spite of the challenges it has faced for decades. A longer view of the LRA's complex history reveals how the group has essentially operated in "survival mode" since it first arose in the late 1980s and as it has interacted with its wider political context. As such, "survival mode" here is not so much a function of the LRA's ability to adapt to current crises. It instead refers to the modal pattern of organization and behavior that has enabled the LRA's long-term resilience. This has been a function of its ongoing, generative ability to adapt to shifts in its politico-military environment through distinct organizational endowments and resource acquisition strategies developed and sustained over time and space.

The distinct question of rebel resilience is a neglected topic in the broader study of civil war and insurgency. Yet investigating the factors that enable rebel groups to withstand the pressures to perish in the violent, contingent environment of civil war is nevertheless important. The focus on the factors behind rebel resilience clarifies broader questions of conflict duration and termination and what makes some conflicts more intractable than others. Ultimately, answering this question matters to understanding how efforts to end armed conflict—peace interventions or counterinsurgency operations—succeed or fail.

This article uses the LRA case to illustrate rebel resilience in spite of time, military pressure, and opportunities to lay down arms. In tackling this question, the theoretical intention here is largely inductive, drawing on a single case to develop more generalizable propositions applicable to armed groups elsewhere. To be sure, the LRA has long defied many categorizations of rebel organization and behavior.¹⁰ Yet while the LRA may be idiosyncratic, it can generate scholarly dialogue about why some rebel groups are more resilient than others. Based on a combination of original research and a close examination of existing work, the article repurposes current knowledge about the LRA towards an understanding of why it has survived for nearly three decades. It argues that the group's organizational structure and its savvy use of resources have been well suited to particular regional political and territorial conditions. The LRA has shown a consistent pattern of situating itself in environments with little or no penetration of state institutions as these spaces become available, and relocating when they become unavailable. It is this distinct interplay between the LRA's characteristics and its broader context that has contributed to the group's overall survival.

The next section introduces the concept of rebel resilience, followed by a brief review of the scholarship on the LRA. The article then supplies a compact explanation for the LRA's resilience. A detailed within-case comparison then follows the LRA across three periods. Process tracing threads the causal relationship between the LRA's organization, resource use,

territorial mobility, and geopolitical shifts. Each period contains careful descriptions of LRA resilience based on qualitative data drawn from an investigation into Ugandan newspaper articles that covered the LRA from 1986 until 2008,¹¹ which augment data collected from secondary sources and field interviews with ex-combatants, military personnel, government officials, Ugandan scholars, and members of Ugandan civil society conducted from 2008–2016.

Understanding rebel resilience

To proceed, some conceptual clarity is in order. Weinstein has helpfully described resilience as how rebels respond to the “shocks” of battlefield loss and success, changes in resources, and counterinsurgency.¹² For him, resilience is a function of a rebellion’s initial economic and social endowments, which help manage the expectations of different fighters through payoffs or promises, and broader relationships with civilian populations.¹³ Alternatively, Jordan explains the resilience of terrorist groups in terms of their internal bureaucracy and levels of popular support, which allow them to persist following the decapitation of their leadership.¹⁴

For this article, rebel resilience means the ability to maintain strategic control over group organization and its resources. Resilient rebellions successfully manage the myriad threats and contingent events found within civil war’s violent environment. They evade defeat over a significant amount of time despite being outmatched militarily, and where an alternative outcome should have plausibly occurred. As such, this concept considers failed attempts at peace negotiations, where a rebellion has either been denied or has foregone an opportunity to settle with the state, and has chosen to keep fighting.

Here, the key driver of resilience is the nexus between organizational cohesion and resources, and how these factors interact with a rebellion’s broader environment. Organizational cohesion is the ability to build and reproduce structures that perform basic tasks and project military violence. There is a range of studies on rebel organization and behavior, particularly on cohesion and fragmentation,¹⁵ and their impact upon rebel effectiveness,¹⁶ rebel alliances,¹⁷ rebel defection,¹⁸ and rebel violence.¹⁹ But to date, this scholarship has focused on the conflict outcomes of victory²⁰ and political settlements,²¹ and has not interrogated the distinct phenomenon of rebel resilience. In addition, the relationship between resilience and resource flows is often misunderstood, playing out largely within the context of Africa’s regional proxy wars.²² Staniland has pointed out the tension²³ between those who argue external resources bolster rebel capacity²⁴ and those who claim they cause rebels to unravel.²⁵ To deal with these contradictions, the LRA challenges both sets of assumptions by demonstrating an ability to survive during periods of both resource abundance and scarcity.

Here the configuration of cohesion and resources is agnostic about the causal relationship between them.²⁶ Instead, they are constituent dimensions that promote resilience by how they interact with a rebellion’s broader environment. What is key here is the role of territory, particularly borderlands with little penetration of state institutions. To be sure, states vary in how they deal with the LRA in their respective hinterlands.²⁷ Yet the general observation here is that lightly governed state peripheries, particularly those characterized by ongoing insecurity, are formidable sanctuaries that provide permissive conditions for a rebel group to nurture its organizational structure and develop resource acquisition strategies. The absence of large-scale political or social structures grants a rebellion the autonomy to regulate internal control and impose hegemony over rival actors, while also reducing the burdens of governing. In turn, as

permeable border regions provide refuge for rebels, the formal legality and limited enforceability of official state boundaries create obstacles for regime counterinsurgency strategies.

Understanding the LRA

Titeca and Costeur have correctly observed that the LRA is subject to competing narratives that often diverge from reality because of the interests of the observers.²⁸ There is, however, a well-established body of scholarly work that explains the LRA's complex origins and why it fights.²⁹ Most of this scholarship shares the understanding that the LRA is a violent expression of northern Uganda's historical alienation, where the group's motives, organizational principles, and violence follow the contours of Acholi ethnic identity within Ugandan politics and society.³⁰ By extension, much of this literature attributes LRA violence against civilians to a rational process of maintaining the group's internal order and as a strategy of social control over its battlefield.³¹

This literature provides key insights into the LRA's history, organization, and behavior, and offers a theoretical and empirical corrective to the longstanding narrative that has cast the LRA as an irrational, millenarian outlier, where madman Kony and his army of child soldiers unleash barbaric violence with no discernable agenda outside ruling Uganda by the Biblical Ten Commandments.³² Instead of reinforcing this caricature, much of the prevailing research explains the LRA in terms of a range of social and political factors.³³ In addition, this work shows that understanding the LRA rebellion must take into account the Ugandan People's Defence Force's (UPDF) brutal counter-insurgency strategies during the country's civil war.³⁴

Most of the scholarship on the LRA, however, has not explicitly pursued the question of its resilience. The focus on the group's motives and the drivers of its violence do not account for why the rebellion has survived for so long, particularly for the many years it has not operated within Uganda. Moreover, portrayals of the UPDF's deliberate acts to sustain the LRA conflict for domestic political reasons do not consider the group's endogenous capacities to survive.³⁵

This article builds upon prevailing scholarship, policy research, and advocacy efforts. In this sense, some of the empirical narrative that follows will look very familiar to LRA experts. Yet the article makes a distinct contribution to understanding the LRA phenomenon by putting existing knowledge and fresh data into a framework that retells the LRA story as one of rebel resilience. The LRA case is important because few of Africa's armed groups have demonstrated more staying power. Indeed, the LRA stands out among Uganda's many rebellions that faced similar challenges, but met a more concrete set of fates.³⁶

Why the LRA persists

The causal wellspring of the LRA's resilience flows from its distinct organizational structure and shrewd resource strategies that have developed within autonomous bush sanctuaries and vis-à-vis the group's wider political environment. This configuration of factors has remained more or less intact for more than three decades as the LRA has interacted with regional geopolitical shifts and in the face of multiple challenges of maintaining an insurgency.

In a region characterized by ongoing conflict and disorder, the LRA has historically confined itself to borderlands where state authority structures are all but non-existent. Its ability to thrive in these spaces reflects the observation that rural bases in heavily forested, mountainous terrain favor insurgency,³⁷ illustrating problems regimes have in projecting

authority over distances that contain low population densities.³⁸ Upended by violence and displacement, far-flung communities in these spaces have little capacity to resist multiple armed groups, of which the LRA has been historically dominant. As such, the LRA's resilience mirrors Max Weber's assertion that "the existence of the war lord . . . depends solely on a chronic state of war and upon a comprehensive organization set for warfare."³⁹

Within this context, the LRA has cultivated and reproduced an organizational structure with a high degree of flexibility to deal with contingent shocks and adapt to shifting regional political conditions. There are two key mechanisms that sustain this structure. The first is a complex set of recruitment and retention strategies that rely upon beliefs in spiritual communication and cultural symbols, which provide internal order and socialize fighters.⁴⁰ To be sure, the LRA's cosmology is a powerful factor undergirding the group's organization and behavior, as reported by multiple ex-combatants.⁴¹ Yet it does not explain cohesion on its own. The second factor is therefore how the LRA's spiritual belief system has reinforced a more traditional military hierarchy. This structure, which will be discussed further in the following sections, was initially established by a core of ex-soldiers, among whom Kony gained notoriety for his use of the cosmological elements of Acholi identity as a source of leadership. As fighters cohered around Kony, they simultaneously reinforced his spiritual authority and the LRA's military hierarchy.

Over time the LRA's core, initially comprised of ex-soldiers and willing followers, has been degraded through battlefield deaths, surrenders, and executions. Because fighters have traditionally been renewable abductees, this has enabled the LRA to deal with these losses and replenish its ranks from time to time. Abductees who became fighters through indoctrination into LRA codes and norms have over time replaced key command roles, becoming full participants in the LRA's social order that fortifies its organizational structure against internal tensions and external shocks, while guaranteeing the primacy of Kony's leadership.⁴² Thus, while the military foundations of the LRA have faded over time, residues of this structure nevertheless form an organizational scaffold that has supported Kony and a small clutch of cadres abducted young and socialized as rebels through adulthood. Far afield from state intrusion, bush life has maintained the LRA's organizational autonomy and provided an identity anchor for fighters who have become both consumers and producers of violence.⁴³ The LRA maintains a system to punish defectors, while ongoing insurgency as a way of life in bush sanctuaries maintains a sense of purpose, establishing harsh barriers for those wishing to leave. Only recently have the organizational mechanisms that reinforce group cohesion and legitimize Kony's authority begun to lose their salience, but not entirely.

In line with its organizational structure, the LRA has also developed resource acquisition strategies that adapt to periods of both abundance and scarcity. To be sure, Sudanese sponsorship in the 1990s bolstered the LRA's capacity to fight, and access to territorial sanctuary incubated LRA fighters and consolidated the group's structure away from military threats and the obligations of rebel governance. Yet a closer look shows that the group's access to external resources was never consistent. A key observation here, and a primary contribution, is that the LRA's resilience has not necessarily come from being awash in resources, but from adapting to *intermittent* access to them. As will be elaborated further below, resource scarcity became a key driver of LRA resilience.

What follows is a within-case comparison across three distinct periods that correspond to structural shifts in the group's broader political environment. To be sure, the interplay between the LRA and its environment was not always seamless. At times, Kony's hold over

Table 1. Overview of LRA resilience.

Phase	Territory	LRA		Process of spatial closure
		Organization	LRA Access to Resources	
Homegrown Rebellion 1986–1993	Northern Uganda	Formation	Residual UPDA; self-sufficiency	Extension of Ugandan state; military pressure
Proxy Warfare 1994–2005	Southern Sudan	Consolidation	Sudanese sponsorship; stockpiling and self-sufficiency	Change in regional politics; extension of South Sudanese state; military pressure
Roving Banditry 2006–Present	DRC/CAR/Sudan	Adaptation	Self-sufficiency; looting; trade in illicit natural resources; limited links with Sudan	Regional military pressure

his organization came under considerable stress. Yet the LRA adapted to these shifts by relocating to new territory where it could maintain its organizational structure, acquire resources, and reproduce the patterns of its violence until that space eventually closed (See Table 1 above).

The first period shows how the LRA's organizational foundation was an outgrowth of the homegrown Ugandan People's Democratic Army (UPDA) that operated in northern Uganda from the late 1980s until the early 1990s. As the Ugandan state expanded its authority, the LRA shifted into a period of organizational consolidation through proxy warfare. From the mid-1990s, the LRA found sanctuary in southern Sudan as a client of the regime in Khartoum. Conditions changed when this sponsorship declined, and the LRA fended for itself until military pressure and the extension of the South Sudanese government pushed the group from its sanctuaries. The LRA's current period of adaptation began in the mid-2000s, where the group has survived as roving bandits in the hinterlands of DRC, CAR, and Sudan.

Homegrown rebellion and the LRA (1986–1994)

The origins of LRA's resilience are found within the wide institutional gaps of rural northern Uganda during the late 1980s, which created fertile conditions for its organizational roots that grew from the relationship between Kony and the UPDA.

When the National Resistance Army (NRA) seized power in 1986, it drove the dominant Acholi faction of the national army northwards, where it regrouped under Bazilio Okello and other military strongmen to form the UPDA as the NRA struggled to exert control over Uganda.⁴⁴ Although Okello had stockpiled arms and ammunition, the UPDA immediately faced a number of setbacks.⁴⁵ Khartoum, initially hoping to use the group against southern Sudanese rebels, expelled it from its territory.⁴⁶ By mid-1987 after suffering heavy battlefield defeats and resource depletion, the group signed the Pece Peace Accord of June 3, 1988.⁴⁷ Yet the agreement did not completely end rebellion in northern Uganda.⁴⁸ Senior officer Odong Latek and a sizeable retinue of intransigent junior officers from the former military remained in the bush fearing criminal punishment.⁴⁹

While these men retained a military structure, they came to depend on alternative strategies of mobilization that had emerged in northern Uganda. At the local level, the war had galvanized a particular strain of Acholi political and spiritual identity. Branch describes how traditional Acholi leaders managed the sudden arrival of thousands of unruly ex-soldiers with cultural rituals that sought to "cleanse" fighters and integrate them into Acholi society.⁵⁰ For

the UPDA, framing the conflict as a spiritual struggle against an external oppressor had been an effective recruitment tool, particularly against the backdrop of widespread Karamojong raiding of Acholi cattle that occurred with impunity.⁵¹

Within this context two key actors—Alice Auma Lakwena and Joseph Kony—developed popular factions within the UPDA, attracting fighters with an appeal to salvation through military victory.⁵² Lakwena formed the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces (HSMF) as her own battalion.⁵³ While she enjoyed initial battlefield success, unorthodox practices (e.g., using shea butter for protection) put her at odds with UPDA commanders.⁵⁴ Her group broke off, siphoning 2,000 fighters from the UPDA’s 60, 80, and 115 Brigades,⁵⁵ while Kony asserted himself as the UPDA’s spiritual leader with his own “Black Battalion.”⁵⁶ Like Lakwena, his reliance on unconventional tactics led to heavy losses and poor battlefield outcomes, earning him hostility from senior commanders. When they called for his arrest, he escaped with 800 fighters and the ensuing pursuit further drained the UPDA’s manpower and ammunition.⁵⁷ Following Lakwena’s 1987 defeat in Jinja, Kony’s faction became dominant as he wrested control of the HSMF’s remnants led by her father, Severino Kiberu-Lukoya.

By October 1988, Latek’s more conventional force merged with the sizable “cosmological” faction controlled by Kony.⁵⁸ This new rebellion, with a core of professional soldiers fleshed out by Acholi youth loyal to Kony, continued to fight the Ugandan government as a low-level insurgency raiding villages for resources and recruits. The rebellion’s new incarnation signaled the rise of Kony’s absolutist vision of Acholi society that sought to purify through violence anyone deemed government loyalists.⁵⁹ This vision, which drew heavily on elements of Acholi spiritual identity, quickly became an organizing principle and a source of resilience.

The decline of homegrown rebellion

Increased rebel violence prompted a corresponding military intrusion into the north that sought to co-opt Acholi elites and transform the structure of politics at the local level while waging a heavy-handed counterinsurgency campaign. These factors led to the elevation of Kony’s leadership, but the contraction of his operational space.

When the Ugandan army killed Latek in 1989, Kony asserted his authority over the ex-soldiers in the insurgency, rebranding the rebellion in a way that reflected its cosmological leanings. Now called the United Holy Salvation Army/Front (UHSA/F), the group had an estimated 10,000 fighters. By 1990, it changed again to the United Democratic Army (UDCA).⁶⁰ And in late 1991, the group was briefly known as the Union for Democracy as it joined forces with the Teso-based Ugandan People’s Army (UPA), which dissolved after a falling out between Kony and UPA leader Hitler Eregu over resources.⁶¹ By September of 1993, the group began calling itself the Lord’s Resistance Army.⁶²

During these formative years, the LRA established its organizational structure, atop of which “Control Altar” directed the group with LRA “Chairman” Kony at its apex. Within Control Altar were Kony’s top cadres that occupied the positions of Vice Chairman/Second in Command, Army Commander, and Deputy Army Commander. Below this group sat the commander of Jogo Division, the umbrella for the LRA’s fighting wing made up of four distinct Brigades—Gilva, Sinia, Trinkle, and Stockree—which then split into battalions, the number of which varied in tandem with the overall size of the fighting force. This structure became the organizational anchor for LRA resiliency and remained intact for many years,

adapting to changes in manpower and resource availability, and maintaining cohesion for months of geographical separation.

However, a range of government actions shrank the rebellion's operational legroom and forced the group to seek an alternative space. The counterinsurgency campaign Operation North weakened the LRA, militarizing northern Uganda and controlling the crucial Nile crossing at Karuma Bridge.⁶³ This strategy included *panda gari*, or the systematic sweeping of towns and villages,⁶⁴ and ran parallel with the NRA's expansion of the Resistance Council (RC) administrative system into all parts of Uganda. While ostensibly designed for local rule, it extended NRA authority as a broader strategy to root out rebel collaborators.⁶⁵ Local Defence Units (LDUs), the RC's coercive arm, defended communities from rebels and assisted the army in its military operations.⁶⁶ For Kony, the expansion of the RC system and use of LDUs reinforced the notion of a divided Acholi society.⁶⁷ As a result, rebels unleashed waves of attacks on civilians and civil servants, particularly against the families of the local militia.⁶⁸

When military action failed to eliminate the group, Betty Bigombe, who had been Minister of State for Pacification of the North since 1988, used army documents to identify ex-soldiers as interlocutors for negotiations.⁶⁹ Ad hoc talks began in late 1993 in Gulu District, where rebels aired demands and the government provided security guarantees and promises of amnesty.⁷⁰ To be sure, the LRA was intransigent, rejecting security arrangements⁷¹ and traditional Acholi elders and political elites as negotiators.⁷² Yet as Dolan argues, the government undercut a meaningful settlement in several ways.⁷³ First was the mismatch between the goals of government negotiators, which created mistrust and hurt their credibility in the eyes of the LRA. Whereas Bigombe was personally invested in true peace negotiations, she had no clear support from the army's upper echelons. Instead, Fred Toolit, her counterpart from army intelligence, viewed the talks as working out a rebel surrender, and his personal animus towards the LRA manifested in a pattern of openly belittling them, who in turn viewed government negotiators as arrogant. Above all, these "peace talks" were more of what Dolan describes as "war talks," as the Ugandan army continued military operations alongside negotiations.⁷⁴ By early 1994, talks broke down amidst boycotts and accusations of dishonesty.⁷⁵ Museveni, who had backed Bigombe in principle but never participated directly, soon tired of increased LRA hedging and mounting demands. On February 6th, he announced that the LRA had seven days to surrender or face a military solution.⁷⁶

Also clear at this stage was Kony's use of the talks to conceal clandestine negotiations with Sudanese intelligence, despite Khartoum's public disavowals.⁷⁷ While the LRA had moved within southern Sudan for several years, key cadre Cesar Acellam coordinated with handlers in the Sudanese army in Juba,⁷⁸ a link facilitated by William Nyuon of the Sudan People's Liberation Army's (SPLA) splinter Nasir faction and members of the Equatoria Defence Force (EDF) militia.⁷⁹ Together Khartoum used these groups to fight John Garang's mainstream SPLA and to disrupt its supply routes through northern Uganda, an alliance that eventually expanded to include the West Nile Bank Front (WNBF).⁸⁰ Following Museveni's ultimatum, the LRA withdrew into southern Sudanese garrison towns for reorganization and training.⁸¹ By February 18, 1994, the group re-emerged heavily armed and newly equipped, opening up fresh attacks in northern Uganda.⁸² With its operational space in northern Uganda now tightened, the LRA had relocated to new sanctuaries. The proxy war that followed expanded the geopolitical impact of the LRA's operations with significant implications for its resilience, a matter to which this article now turns.

Proxy warfare and the LRA (1994–2005)

From the mid-1990s, the LRA became part of a proxy war as the Sudanese government provided weapons and military training to fight the SPLA and territorial sanctuaries from which to attack Uganda. The LRA's experience in southern Sudan consolidated the group's structure, hardened its fighters, and taught them how to survive in borderlands for years of operations that kept northern Uganda in almost permanent humanitarian crisis. While the common view holds that Sudanese sponsorship bolstered the LRA, another look shows that both the rise *and* the fall of regional proxy warfare were key to the group's resilience as it weathered periods of hardship.

Southern Sudan's isolation firmed up the LRA's hierarchy established during its early years. The relationship between Kony, Control Altar, and operational brigades became a flexible, decentralized structure that could carry out the dual priorities of guaranteeing Kony's personal security and dealing with fluctuations in military capacity. The shift to Sudan also meant a change in the LRA's mode of attracting fighters, which forbade volunteers and restricted recruitment to abduction.⁸³ Thus, while commanders drew primarily from ex-UPDA standpatters, renewable Acholi "youths" (aged roughly 12–25) populated the rank and file.⁸⁴ Violent rituals socialized abductees and reinforced Kony's spiritual authority. With minimal rewards, ample punishment, and few chances of escape, Kony broke down and rebuilt those who lived through the process into obedient fighters, able-bodied and able to endure physical hardship in bush sanctuaries.⁸⁵

Support from the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) was a decisive factor to the LRA's military strength and the intensification of the conflict.⁸⁶ Kony kept an office in Juba and was treated like a senior officer in the SAF, traveling to Khartoum at least four times.⁸⁷ Eastern Equatorial base camps trained thousands of fighters in jungle warfare, and they gained battlefield experience fighting the SPLA alongside the SAF. At times the LRA was even better equipped than the UPDF.⁸⁸

The LRA's alliance with the SAF, however, was not always seamless. Khartoum's primary interest was to use the group against the SPLA.⁸⁹ Many LRA fighters understood their role only as fighting the "Dinka" alongside the SAF.⁹⁰ But Kony's priorities in Uganda often put him at odds with Khartoum and led to periodic ruptures in the LRA's resource pipeline. In 1995 for instance, Khartoum suspended the LRA's cross-border offensives and redirected the group to halt the SPLA's progress through Eastern Equatoria.⁹¹ The SPLA had overrun government garrisons and dislodged the LRA from its training camps near Juba.⁹² Battles with the SPLA wounded Kony and killed countless LRA fighters.⁹³ These failures compelled the SAF to withhold support entirely and issue Kony ultimatums⁹⁴—Kony was once even placed under house arrest with his monthly stipend cut off.⁹⁵

To be sure, exploiting tensions between Khartoum and Kampala reflected Kony's grasp of the region's geopolitics.⁹⁶ But while the LRA received military support, the group was largely expected to fend for itself, only receiving sporadic SAF visits due to logistical constraints and its limited capacity.⁹⁷ It was here that the LRA developed a diversified strategy of resource acquisition—carefully maintaining stockpiles of military equipment while creating autonomous, self-sustaining agrarian communities in their bush camps.⁹⁸ Violent raids on civilian targets had the multiple roles of acquiring foodstuffs, broadcasting operational resolve, and simultaneously replenishing and training manpower.

Thus, the intermittent access to sponsorship compelled the LRA to develop strategies distinct to Uganda and Sudan's borderlands. Although Sudanese resources helped consolidate the LRA's organizational structure and gain proficiency in fighting, the group's experiences with autonomy and self-sufficiency during this period also developed its resilience.

The decline of proxy warfare

The LRA's space began to close when outsider-brokered talks culminated in the December 1999 Nairobi Agreement, which committed Sudan and Uganda to end their proxy war.⁹⁹ While LRA attacks in northern Uganda decreased,¹⁰⁰ the group remained anchored in Eastern Equatoria.¹⁰¹ Ugandan troops had operated in southern Sudan since 1996, initially in support of SPLA operations and in defense of its border.¹⁰² But in early 2002, UPDF presence was formalized as Khartoum allowed it to launch Operation Iron Fist, which sent 10,000 soldiers to disrupt the LRA's safe havens.¹⁰³ Khartoum further signaled a commitment to dislodge the LRA by openly skirmishing with the group¹⁰⁴ and by renewing Iron Fist.¹⁰⁵

At times, shallow resource linkages remained. For instance, LRA fighters periodically traded with the SAF,¹⁰⁶ and following their loss of Torit, SAF officers established the LRA camp "*wad obwongo*" ("the relationship is back"¹⁰⁷) while coordinating with Cesar Acellam by radio.¹⁰⁸ But while the LRA stockpiled its "farewell package,"¹⁰⁹ the group was severed from steady resupply and became unwelcome in its established sanctuaries.

Iron Fist upended the LRA base camps and scattered its fighters, but did not deliver a decisive knockout blow.¹¹⁰ In 2003 the group re-entered Uganda and opened up a fresh wave of brutal attacks that extended beyond Acholiland into Lira and Teso districts. Well-armed, fleet-footed, and knowledgeable of the terrain, the LRA broke into small cells carrying out well-planned, coordinated attacks in northern Uganda to acquire food and fresh abductees that swelled its ranks.¹¹¹ After operations LRA fighters retreated to new camps in southern Sudan where Kony issued orders from well above the "red line" of the Juba-Torit road, which Khartoum forbade the UPDF from crossing.¹¹²

Now less of a proxy war than a renewed Ugandan conflict, the LRA's high-profile violence caused massive civilian displacement.¹¹³ Tens of thousands crowded into squalid, army-run "protected villages,"¹¹⁴ which drained the countryside of civilians and allowed the government to control them under the guise of protection.¹¹⁵ While international agencies provided much needed humanitarian assistance,¹¹⁶ such camps were largely designed to demobilize Acholi civilians, to deprive LRA rebels of resources, and allow the military to pursue rebels.¹¹⁷ Yet rather than providing real protection, some camps emboldened the LRA and became targets, as illustrated by the Barlonyo massacre that killed over 300 IDPs, which broadcasted LRA capacity and resolve.¹¹⁸ And while many civilians were victims of LRA violence, UPDF predations upon the Acholi population were not uncommon,¹¹⁹ producing sympathizers. Among them were petty traders and shopkeepers in Gulu who provided a small revenue stream for the LRA by selling looted items.¹²⁰

The dual problems of managing camp security and tracking the LRA drew the UPDF away from southern Sudan, providing temporary relief for the LRA. The army also struggled to manage a force fresh off lengthy deployments in eastern DRC and overcome major corruption problems.¹²¹ The UPDF soon, however, regrouped and began using ethnic *amuka* militias to protect IDPs and free army units to pursue LRA fighters.¹²² An expanded counterinsurgency campaign killed scores of LRA and key commander Charles Tabuleh,¹²³ while intensified

pressure with helicopter gunships caused organizational splits, hemorrhaged fighters, and prompted strongmen Kenneth Banya and Sam Kolo to accept a government amnesty.¹²⁴ Weakened militarily, Kony attempted the subterfuge of negotiations,¹²⁵ where he understood that dialogue with Acholi leaders could politicize the conflict domestically.¹²⁶ But a disingenuous peace process unfolded with ceasefires routinely broken on all sides as the LRA used talks to regroup and the UPDF to focus on their ongoing hunt for rebels.¹²⁷

Finally, the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) ended the civil war in Sudan and ejected the LRA while a revitalized UPDF blocked the group’s re-entry into Uganda.¹²⁸ To be sure, the CPA did not address every aspect of southern Sudan’s security environment. The LRA was one of a range of armed groups in the region that operated in shifting combinations and with fluid loyalties, where violence against civilians was common while its perpetrators remained ambiguous.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, the new government of South Sudan (GOSS) sufficiently expanded administrative jurisdiction over LRA territory while the SPLA conducted joint operations with the UPDF and with the EDF militia.¹³⁰ Speculation remained that Khartoum maintained resource links to use the LRA as a potential spoiler for the CPA’s implementation,¹³¹ but by September 2005 the LRA’s war had burned out in northern Uganda and its remaining members fled southern Sudan. By many measures, these events should have led to the total elimination of the LRA, but they did not, and the group entered into a new period of adaptation.

Roving banditry and the LRA (2005–Present)

The geopolitical closure of northern Uganda and southern Sudan, and the immediate threat of decimation, pushed the LRA to seek a new sanctuary where they could regroup militarily.¹³² In September 2005, commander Vincent Otti led an advance group of LRA fighters to eastern DRC’s Garamba National Park—a harrowing journey that required crossing the Nile with a raft made of jerry cans.¹³³ There were several reasons for the move to DRC, including a rumored invitation from Laurent Kabila.¹³⁴ In addition to the territorial advantages of relocating to these vast hinterlands, Kony also hoped to reconnect with Sudanese resource networks that had previously supported the WNBF and the Allied Democratic Front (ADF). Moreover, Garamba provided a suitable staging ground to rejoin the Sudanese military in south Darfur,¹³⁵ and for the eventual expansion to the remote jungles of eastern CAR.

Anchoring this period was the Juba peace process, which unfolded in fits and starts for two and half years and created suitable conditions for the LRA, which sought to gain political credibility while reorganizing its fighters in the DRC.¹³⁶ In addition, Kony sought leverage against the International Criminal Court (ICC), and Juba provided a chance to delay indictments for him and his top cadres as lawyers padded the LRA’s negotiation team.¹³⁷ Led by U. N. Special Envoy Joachim Alberto Chissano and South Sudan Vice President Riek Machar, Juba generated five protocols to end one of Africa’s most protracted conflicts and to address development in northern Uganda.¹³⁸ The Cessation of Hostilities agreement of August 26, 2006, renewed four times over 2 years, was the backbone of this process.¹³⁹ LRA fighters were to assemble in the two areas of Owiny Kibul east of the Nile, and Ri-Kwangba to the west, and were to be guaranteed safe passage by the Ugandan and South Sudanese militaries.

While some LRA commanders approached the process with goodwill, Kony’s pervasive paranoia and mistrust of the Ugandan government compelled him to keep his options open.¹⁴⁰ As such, the period of the Juba process was an opportunity for the LRA to adapt to

shifting politico-military realities in the region. DRC sanctuaries provided space for the LRA to strategically recalibrate, while coalescing more tightly around protecting Kony's security as a fundamental priority. Remaining in the bush, fighters collected food distributions assessed for inflated numbers of beneficiaries while the Ugandan government and international donors covered the expenses of LRA negotiators in Juba.¹⁴¹ The period was also accompanied by a relative lull in LRA violence, limited abductions, and the suspension in abductee training.¹⁴² And although there was evidence of ongoing Sudan resource linkages, moving to DRC coincided with a tangible break from Khartoum.¹⁴³ That said, the LRA's military capacity was far from diminished. At times its DRC hideouts enabled the group to hold its own against the Congolese army and U.N. peacekeepers.¹⁴⁴

However, with fighters in DRC and negotiators in Juba, the process exposed and created organizational divisions within the LRA. Its Juba delegates were largely Acholi exiles, outsiders to the LRA command who used negotiations to access political sinecures in Kampala.¹⁴⁵ Rifts between Kony and those who wished to stop fighting led to an increasing number of LRA fighters taking advantage of an extended amnesty.¹⁴⁶ At times key Ugandan officials exploited these rifts—Museveni's brother Salim Saleh is said to have offered Vincent Otti a side deal.¹⁴⁷ Kony subsequently executed Otti for insubordination, which harkened back to the same sentence given to key cadre Otti Lagony a decade earlier. Such executions reflected a consistent internal strategy of policing disloyalty and purging Control Altar of fence-sitters or those with questionable allegiance to Kony.¹⁴⁸

Running parallel to these dynamics was the role of the Ugandan army. With the backing of the U.S., the UPDF claimed to be guarantors of security in southern Sudan, whose new government welcomed them. Yet the UPDF often harassed civilians, engaged in extractive business ventures, and militarized areas near LRA assembly points.¹⁴⁹ According to one account, the UPDF's use of the 105th Battalion, composed of ex-LRA combatants, further blurred the lines between armed groups responsible for attacks on civilians.¹⁵⁰ Thus, rather than lower barriers to the Juba peace process, the UPDF's expanded presence in southern Sudan undermined confidence and was interpreted by the LRA as belligerent.

Because of such factors, Juba was marred by regular ceasefire violations, walkouts, and above all the LRA's refusal to gather in the assembly areas. By mid-2008, after Kony had repeatedly failed to appear to sign the final documents of the accord,¹⁵¹ the process collapsed, signaling the group's unwillingness to reach a political settlement. In August rebels launched a set of coordinated attacks on six localities in DRC and South Sudan, killing and abducting hundreds of civilians.¹⁵² As these attacks continued through December, the armies of DRC, Uganda, and South Sudan began pursuing the LRA more formally. In a targeted air campaign, Operation Lightning Thunder attacked Kony's main base in Garamba.¹⁵³ However, due to UPDF intelligence failures, the LRA evacuated before the attack and UPDF ground troops arrived at an empty camp,¹⁵⁴ while rebels killed over 1,000 in reprisals.¹⁵⁵ These events punctuated a new adaptive phase for the LRA, characterized by new organizational and resource acquisition strategies.

“Survival mode”

The shift to DRC, CAR, and Sudan has meant acclimatizing to unfamiliar territory, and subduing and recruiting members from non-Acholi populations. But like northern Uganda in the late 1980s and southern Sudan in the 1990s, the LRA's new sanctuaries have provided

similar permissive conditions for the group—few state institutions and a bounty of new resources for which it was primed to adapt organizationally.¹⁵⁶

Where observers have attributed this to “survival mode,” the LRA has actually engaged its well-developed resilience strategies in two key ways within the broader politico-military context of central Africa’s borderlands. First, the LRA hierarchy still exists, albeit not as cohesive as it once was due to the outflow of its more longstanding senior commanders, extended periods of geographical separation, and sporadic communication between units.¹⁵⁷ An analysis of the LRA’s organizational structure from 2003–2008 shows that around half of its key commanders were killed, captured, or received amnesty upon surrender.¹⁵⁸ The firm hierarchy established during earlier periods has become much more elastic as Kony has reorganized and replaced the former brigades (Stocktree, etc.) with three major groups and corresponding sub-groups scattered between semi-permanent camps in in DRC’s north-eastern Orientale province and eastern CAR.¹⁵⁹ Cut off from one another, these groups act more independently and are largely expected to fend for themselves, while Kony periodically replaces commanders in order to undermine potential bonds between fighters that may pose a challenge to his authority, which has remained intact despite distance.¹⁶⁰ While commanders still retain ranks modeled off the UPDA, ex-soldiers from the LRA’s formative years no longer occupy the upper echelons of its hierarchy. Instead, formerly abducted fighters, promoted according to the whims of Kony, hold commander positions that are also restricted to its Acholi members.¹⁶¹ Kony is reportedly grooming his son for a leadership position.¹⁶² In exercising his authority, Kony still draws on elements of Acholi spiritual identity, which have more impact on Acholi fighters, but are still viewed as “magic” by those recruited from DRC and CAR.¹⁶³

As mentioned earlier, new splinter groups have emerged. Yet the core organization still carries out Kony’s long-term strategic orders via bodyguards deployed as ground runners rather than electronic communications that can be intercepted. Above all, each group maintains an explicit LRA identity.¹⁶⁴ And while LRA violence has not disappeared, these loose, semi-autonomous groups survive in the bush through a combination of looting, shifting cultivation, and petty trading, using abducted manpower to transport goods and releasing abductees after they are used. In addition, years of bush autonomy have conditioned the LRA to subsist on seasonal rivers, a network of boreholes, and temporary farms supplemented by hunting, knowledge of wild foods, and healing herbs.¹⁶⁵

Second, while LRA fighters continue to rely on looting as a significant resource base,¹⁶⁶ today’s LRA exploits regional illicit resource networks in conjunction with other actors like the ex-Séléka. The LRA now sustains itself with natural resources from the DRC and CAR, particularly ivory, diamonds, and gold.¹⁶⁷ The key mechanism for this mode of resource acquisition runs through the group’s renewed informal relationship with Sudanese officials. More of a sin of omission than commission on the part of the Sudanese government, the *Kafia Kinji* border region shelters Kony and his inner retinue and provides markets for looted items and commodities while remaining politically off limits for RTF operations.¹⁶⁸

However, there are some signs that such strategies may not be sufficient for sustaining the LRA indefinitely, and its current space may soon close by virtue of a regional military strategy that has pushed the group further into isolation. The Ugandan-led RTF, funded by the European Union and assisted logistically by U.S. Special Forces, has removed senior commanders from the battlefield and increased fighter defections by military pressure where possible and via avenues for surrender and amnesty encouraged by leaflet drops, radio broadcasts, and messages given from helicopter loudspeakers.¹⁶⁹

Despite these achievements, the military hunt for the LRA is hamstrung by several difficulties. The RTF's capacity remains limited so long as Uganda remains the only troop-contributing country to project force over so vast an area (~115,000 square km), which further limits the force's ability to protect civilians from LRA violence. Moreover, regional upheaval has imposed political constraints upon the RTF, and Sudan's ongoing reluctance to cooperate with the regional force limits its mission in ways that allow the LRA to survive. At the time of this writing, several things suggest LRA resilience is coming to an end. Rumors abound about Kony's illness and his willingness to come out of the bush,¹⁷⁰ as the salience of his spiritual hold over LRA fighters is on the wane, and as he faces increasing difficulties in finding and trading ivory.¹⁷¹ However, Uganda has recently expressed an unwillingness to extend its role in the RTF, which may provide the LRA renewed space to survive longer.¹⁷²

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to use the LRA case to illustrate some of the necessary conditions for rebel resilience, with the aim of stimulating further research on this phenomenon. The LRA has survived by virtue of its organizational cohesion, resource use, and the ability to read its political terrain in order to exploit regions without state structures.

While the LRA's trajectory may be idiosyncratic, it nevertheless reflects changes in the broader patterns of conflict in Africa, where full-scale civil wars have given way to fragmented armed groups with decentralized power bases that sprawl across remote border regions.¹⁷³ This pattern is evident with other armed groups like Nigeria's Boko Haram, CAR's Séléka rebels, and the myriad militias of South Sudan and Somalia. It also helps explain another Ugandan rebellion, the Allied Democratic Front (ADF), which was considered defeated but has reemerged as a transnational phenomenon similar to the LRA.¹⁷⁴

The LRA has shown to be well suited to geopolitical shifts that occur across institutionally sparse environments. In particular, the group's exploitation of regional bush sanctuaries has been its historical comparative advantage, allowing for the development and maintenance of a flexible organizational structure, and the savvy acquisition and use of human and natural resources. Indeed, during the Juba peace talks Salim Saleh correctly observed, "their biggest weapon was sanctuary."¹⁷⁵

Mancur Olson once distinguished roving bandits from stationary bandits, the latter of which require a degree of political order to guarantee the "rational monopolization of theft" of territory under its control.¹⁷⁶ While the LRA has been periodically semi-sedentary, seldom has it sought to directly govern people or territory. And while resource plunder has always been part of its resource acquisition strategy, it has now become central to the LRA's roving banditry, where ongoing political disorder in its borderland sanctuaries continues to enable the group's resilience.

Ultimately, the LRA case matters because of its *longue durée* humanitarian consequences that continue to fuel advocacy for a sustained regional military effort to deal with the group.¹⁷⁷ As such, efforts to end the LRA can consider the factors that have historically closed insurgent space. While these have pivoted largely on coercive responses, with the professionalization of state armies and the regional coordination of regional military operations, other mechanisms invariably involve building and extending legitimate state institutions, supporting war-fatigued societies, and holding perpetrators of violence accountable to regional and international norms.

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