

**CHRISTIAN DIMENSIONS OF VIOLENCE:
THE SÉLÉKA/ANTI-BALAKA MILITIAS AND THE LORD'S
RESISTANCE ARMY IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC¹**

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DOI: 10.24193/subbeuropaea.2021.1.01

Published Online: 2021-06-30

Published Print: 2021-06-30

Abstract

Beginning in 2013, the Central African Republic has been engulfed in a civil war pitting successive governments against a substantial number of armed groups who also compete against each other for control over territory, population and resources. Some of these groups are claiming to be defenders of religious groups in the country, with the Séléka militias fighting for the Muslim communities and the anti-Balaka groups claiming Christian roots and inclinations. Other religiously inspired armed groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army are also present in the country. The following study is an attempt to understand how the "religious" label can be applied to such armed groups and whether it can influence their behavior, thus bringing into light a valuable, albeit lesser known example on how AGs and religion are connected in contemporary Africa.

¹ This article is based on a paper presented at the "The African Political Systems and the Challenge of Globalization" conference, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, 5-6 November 2020. The article was elaborated within the Human Capital Operational Program 2014-2020, co-financed by the European Social Fund, under the project POCU/380/6/13/124708 no. 37141/23.05.2019, with the title "Researcher-Entrepreneur on Labour Market in the Fields of Intelligent Specialization (CERT-ANTREP)", coordinated by the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration.

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Keywords: armed groups, religion, Central African Republic, violence, civil war

Religiously-inspired armed groups (AGs) are ubiquitous on the scene of contemporary conflicts, with Central Africa² no exception to that rule. While the attention of many researchers has been drawn mostly to events to the north of the region, with jihadist groups very active in areas stretching from Libya and Algeria towards Mali and Chad³, the events of the last decade in the Central African Republic (CAR) point to a different relevance of the discussion concerning the link between AGs and religion in contemporary affairs. Particularly the fact that in the CAR the radical Islamist angle is virtually absent, while Christian and Christian allied militias dominate vast regions of the country points to the relevance and interest of studying AGs in this otherwise neglected African nation.

This article is a modest attempt at using insights from recent research and classification of AGs coming from strategic studies in order to participate in the larger conversation concerning violence and religion in the CAR and to understanding how the self-proclaimed religious dimension of these groups can shed a light on their behaviour, and thus on the link between AGs and religion in contemporary Africa. The authors are well aware of the difficulties of such an attempt, being confronted with the scarcity of data about events and processes in the CAR, as well as the lack of substantial scholarly research on the topic. However, this is (mostly) a theoretical attempt and should be treated as such.

The classification of AGs understood as basic social units fundamentally interested in establishing, defending and contesting social order sees them as divided according to two major criteria. The first is

² By Central Africa we understand in this essay the vast area stretching from South Sudan and the Central African Republic towards the Great African Lakes and comprising the two Congos, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi.

³ Richard Philippe Chelin, "From the Islamic State of Algeria to the Economic Caliphate of the Sahel: The Transformation of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 32(6), 2020, pp. 1186-1205.

permanence or impermanence, but this is not relevant for the present article, as all CAR AGs are permanent armed groups in the sense in which they do not plan to dissolve until their goals are achieved. The second criterion divides AGs by the purpose for which they exercise violence. In this regard, they can firstly be economic exploitative AGs, a category mostly or solely interested in extracting resources from the target communities and in rearranging some patterns of economic distribution. Secondly, they can be political-ideological AGs, fundamentally interested in rearranging the patterns of a society in accordance to a set of ethical and perhaps ontological beliefs about how a given society is supposed to evolve. If the source of these beliefs is one or more supernatural beings, we can consider religiously-motivated AGs as belonging to this group. One should note that if this classification is adopted, there is no need to distinguish between state and non-state AGs.⁴

As this article is being written, one of the cycles of violence that has engulfed the African nation since its independence⁵ seems to be completed. Aided by its allies (Russia and Rwanda), the regime of Faustin-Archange Touadéra - with claims to legitimacy due to having international recognition and being validated at the polls - is keeping its military opponents at bay.⁶ For the first time in nine years the government in Bangui controls more territory of the country than opposing armed groups and has a substantial military superiority over its opponents, largely due to the involvement of better trained and equipped foreign military forces. This military superiority, it would seem, is also used in ways similar to warfare waged by non-state AGs, with civilians assassinated at will by the

⁴ See a larger discussion in Andrei Miroiu, *Political Theory of Armed Groups: Social Order and Armed Groups*, Springer, 2020.

⁵ Abdurrahim Sıradağ, "Explaining the Conflict in Central African Republic: Causes and Dynamics", *Epiphany. Journal of Transdisciplinary Studies*, 9(3), 2016, pp. 86-103.

⁶ While condemning violence against its own peaceful citizens, see UN News, "Central African Republic: Rights experts concerned over 'Russian advisers' and close contacts with UN peacekeepers", <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1088802>> , accessed on 11 June 2021.

foreign forces that upend the Touadéra regime.⁷ In terms of our research interests, the cycle is also approaching its end: the military opposition of the regime consists of a coalition grouping, amongst other smaller AGs, the very opponents during the bloody 2013-2019 civil war in the country, the Muslim Séléka and the Christian anti-Balaka militias. These two loose AGs have joined forces in late 2020 in common hatred of the Touadéra regime, thus ending years of bloodshed that has threatened at times to turn into religiously-inspired genocide. This alliance dedicated to the pursuit of a violent overthrow of the current regime is mirrored by societal trends, with people of both confessions now seeking security from violence in common Christian-Muslim shelters.⁸

Has this alliance made questionable the use of the religious label for understanding the activities of AGs in the CAR? One may be inclined to see things in this framework, although there are, of course, arguments to the contrary. Firstly, there is no reason to think that the coalition is a lasting one. It may very well collapse, either upon success or defeat and sectarian violence would thus return to areas of the country controlled by these militias.⁹ Secondly, the alliance says something about current political conditions in the CAR, but does not account for the multitude of acts of

⁷ Tim Lister, Sebastian Shukla and Clarissa Ward, "‘It Was Our Children They Killed’. Russian Mercenaries Implicated in the Torture and Killing of Civilians in Central African Republic", <<https://edition.cnn.com/2021/06/15/africa/central-african-republic-russian-mercenaries-cmd-intl/index.html>> , accessed on 16 June 2021.

⁸ Fredrick Nzwili, "Christians and Muslims in Central African Republic Share Shelter as Renewed Fighting Displaces Thousands" <<https://ifyc.org/article/christians-and-muslims-central-african-republic-share-shelter-renewed-fighting-displaces>> , accessed on 11 June 2021.

⁹ This is a distinct possibility, as violence along religious lines continues, albeit in a more muted form, see Amnesty International, "Central African Republic: Amnesty Investigation Reveals Full Horror of Conflict and Election Violence" <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/02/central-african-republic-amnesty-investigation-reveals-full-horror/>>, accessed on 11 June 2021.

violence committed in the name of religion by these groups in the previous six or seven years.¹⁰

Indeed, these acts of violence have been thoroughly documented ever since the Séléka AGs overthrew the regime of (Christian) president François Bozizé in early 2013 and installed the first Muslim president of the nation, Michel Djotodia. They have been responded in kind by Christian AGs usually called anti-Balaka and initially formed in rural areas by members of local militias that used to operate against cattle-thieves and roving bandits¹¹ and in urban areas by youths feeling threatened of being ruled by a religious minority imposing its will through violence. These anti-banditry local militias are a long-term reality in the CAR and generally in Central Africa, spanning all faiths and many rural communities.¹² A well known case, for instance, are the (Muslim) Peul/Fulani archer company, guarding their cattle-herding communities for a number of decades now while still using traditional weapons against firearms bearing robbers.¹³

Sectarian violence has continued unabated for the years stretching from mid-2013 until the signing of a series of peace agreements between the central government and a number of these groups starting in 2019, though the AGs did not disarm after the ceasefire, turn of events rightfully seen as worrisome by religious figures in the country.¹⁴ The forms of this

¹⁰ On these violences, as well as for a forceful argument for the religious nature of the conflict, see J. Mathieu, "La Centrafrique : Guerre civile, conflit religieux, ou génocide ?" <<http://www.geolinks.fr/continent/afrique/afrique-centrale/la-centrafrique-guerre-civile-conflit-religieux-ou-genocide/>>, accessed on 30 October 2020.

¹¹ For the role of cattle-thieving in contemporary Africa, see Lawrence E. Cline, "War on the Hoof: Regional Security in Africa and Livestock Conflicts", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 31(1), 2020, pp. 87-105.

¹² Henry Kam Kah, "Anti-Balaka/Séléka, Regionalisation and Separatism in the History of the Central African Republic", *Conflict Studies Quarterly*, 9, 2014, p. 36.

¹³ Teddy Seguin, "Les archers peuls de Centrafrique", <<https://natureencible.pagesperso-orange.fr/archercentrafrique.html>>, accessed on 11 June 2021.

¹⁴ Lucie Sarr, "Les évêques centrafricains s'inquiètent de l'omniprésence des groupes armés", <<https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/eveques-centrafricains-sinquietent-lomnipresence-groupes-armes-2020-09-07-1201112677>>, accessed on 30 October 2020.

violence should be mentioned here, as they are reminiscent of acts of religiously-inspired violence everywhere.

Both groups have been involved in the assassination and mass-murder of their religious opponents.¹⁵ Execution by firearms, machetes as well as bombings of homes or shelters of those of the opposing (religious) camp have been frequent. Religious cleansing has been perpetrated extensively in the CAR. According to some estimates, at the height of their power in late 2013 and early 2014 the anti-Balaka forced out 99% of the Muslim population of the capital Bangui.¹⁶ Churches as well as mosques have been burned throughout the country.¹⁷ In particularly gruesome acts of violence, mobs hacked to death members of other religious communities, burned them and even engaged in acts of cannibalism.¹⁸ These systematic acts of sectarian violence led to hundreds of thousands of people being displaced from their homes, with most seeking refuge either in other parts of the country but many crossing the borders with the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Cameroon.¹⁹ With northern and eastern Congo being engulfed in its own series of conflicts (though mostly motivated by social

¹⁵ "In this renewed episode of religious hatred, thousands of civilians have lost their lives; villages have been burned to the ground and half-a-million civilians have been forced to leave their homes escaping from the fierce eye of blind faith" wrote Toby Cadman, "Religious War in Central African Republic", <<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/7/1/religious-war-in-central-african-republic>> , accessed on 11 June 2021.

¹⁶ Audu Bulama Bukarti, "Ethno-Religious Violence in the Central African Republic", <<https://institute.global/policy/ethno-religious-violence-central-african-republic>>, accessed on 11 June 2021.

¹⁷ Ewelina Ochab, "The Religious War In The Central African Republic Continues", <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2018/05/09/the-religious-war-in-central-african-republic-continues/>>, accessed on 11 June 2021.

¹⁸ "CAR Cannibal: Why I Ate Man's Leg", <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-25708024>> , accessed on 10 June 2021.

¹⁹ For 2021 conditions of refugees living in the Democratic Republic of the Congo see "Central African Refugees in the DRC Living in Dire Conditions" <https://www.africanews.com/2021/05/21/central-african-refugees-in-the-drc-living-in-dire-conditions> , accessed on 22 June 2021.

and economic concerns, not religion),²⁰ conditions on the ground in the CAR must have been dire indeed to force many to move south.

International organisations, unable to stop many of these acts of violence even though a peacekeeping mission was established and sent early on in the country, feared for some time a Rwandan-magnitude genocide. Initial French military ventures in the country, while somehow successful in preventing mass-scale violence, were unable to completely stop localised massacres.²¹ Indeed, even Pope Francis's November 2015 visit to the beleaguered country failed to make a serious impact on violence between religious communities, although it did help consolidate interfaith dialogue.²² Some sources continue to see in the continuation of the interfaith dialogue a chance for substantial improvement of the security situation in the CAR. As relations at the top level (between Catholics, Protestants and Muslim) have been cordial for quite some time, this chance for peace should, according to some, come from the improvement of the dialogue and cooperation at local levels, particularly between priests, pastors and imams.²³

²⁰ For recent violence in northern Congo, even in urban areas, see Judith Verweijen, Christoph Vogel, and Josaphat Musamba Bussy, "Rebels and the City: Urban Dimensions of Armed Mobilization in the Eastern Congo", <<https://biblio.ugent.be/publication/8668061/file/8668067>>, accessed on 15 February 2021.

²¹ Indeed, some choices made by the French military commanders may have indeed prolonged sectarian violence, "The decision of the French-led military operation – codenamed 'Sangaris' – to disband the Séléka rebels without paying much attention to the anti-Balaka has been a fatal mistake. This not only paved the way for this new group of rebels to heighten their deadly campaign against the Muslim population, but it has also heightened tensions between Christians and Muslims" (Mouhamadou Kane, "Interreligious Violence in the Central African Republic: An Analysis of the Causes and Implications", *African Security Review*, 23(3), 2014, p. 315).

²² Vatican News, "CAR's Cardinal Nzapalainga: Hopes and Challenges of Peacemaking", <<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/africa/news/2021-05/car-s-cardinal-nzapalainga-the-peacemaker-hopes-and-challenges.html>>, accessed on 11 June 2021.

²³ Laura Collins, "Central African Republic: A Role for Religious Leaders in Calming Conflict?", *United States Institute of Peace*, <<https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/12/central-african-republic-role-religious-leaders-calming-conflict>>, accessed on 11 June 2021.

One should note that a number of researchers refuse to see any utility for the religious label in an analysis of CAR-based armed groups. Some see the overlapping conflicts as originating from the bad governance and social exclusion that characterised the country since its early days as an independent nation.²⁴ Certain patterns of social exclusion, with substantial economic consequences, are even inherited from the colonial and pre-colonial times, with Muslim individuals from the north of the country being systematically regarded as foreigners, as immigrants from Chad and Sudan and not really fitting in Central African society. This continuous discrimination explains partially the 2012-2013 revolt of the Seleka's and their attempt to install a Muslim president, Michel Djotodia.²⁵

Others argue that, as the conflict has progressed, survival of the AGs through pilfering local communities has become more important than the defence of their own religious turf.²⁶ Indeed, as the conflict became endemic in the country, many fighters simply stayed with their AGs because they had no place left to call home. Once the initial religious goals

²⁴ "L'exclusion sociale de certaines couches de la société, la discrimination des régions du nord du pays, la mauvaise gouvernance et la corruption sont à l'origine de cette crise. En réalité, la République centrafricaine (RCA), qui connaît des coups d'État à répétition, peine depuis plus d'une trentaine d'années à se doter d'un État stable avec des institutions et des politiques démocratiques." (Barwendé Sané, "Anatomie du conflit centrafricain", *Relations* 776, 2015, p. 9).

²⁵ "The Vakaga region in the northeast of the country, the stronghold of Séléka alliance, is an enclave stigmatized by its Islamic religion and by the enslaving past of its inhabitants. This population was forgotten by the state, which for decades has left them outside their meagre investment, therefore its citizens maintained close ties with Chad and Sudan. The institutional slovenliness, the cultural proximity to countries in conflict, the porous borders and the abundance of mercenaries settled down in this region allowed the armed groups to operate freely. At the same time, the detachment of this population to Central Africans from the South of the country only increased" wrote Trinidad Deiros in "Central African Republic: The Invention of a Religious Conflict", *Opinion Papers (Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos)*, 67, 2014, p. 5.

²⁶ Karim Lemond "En Centrafrique, la religion n'est plus un prétexte aux violences", <<https://www.la-croix.com/Monde/Afrique/En-Centrafrigue-religion-nest-pretexte-violences-2017-08-11-1200869121>>, accessed on 30 October 2020.

had been achieved (partially, of course), some of the AG members would not quit them simply because there was no other viable solution for them.²⁷

Other sources, though, complicate matters from a strictly confessional point of view. Members of the anti-Balaka AGs, supposed to be steadfast Christians, stick to substantial animist beliefs and practices, with a good number of them sporting charms that are supposed to ward off enemy bullets. In mystical ceremonies, drugs are taken for the same purpose.²⁸ Drugs were also taken by their opponents, the fighters of the Séléka AGs. In their case, opiates were used to alleviate fears before going into combat or into missions of assassinations.²⁹ It can be thus safely said that both Christianity and Islam are blended with local religions, animist and traditional beliefs, making thus difficult to place them among the ranks of consecrated denomination, be it Christian or Muslim. The situation is further complicated on the Christian side by the lack of self-identification of AGs with the doctrine of a specific Christian denomination, although estimates - albeit not very new - place the Christian population at 89,8 %, with 51,4 % Protestant and 28,9 % Roman Catholic, while the Muslim population can be estimated at around 10%.³⁰

Yet religious-based violence was undoubtedly a characteristic of many of these groups. The anti-Balaka not only targeted Séléka or former Séléka fighters, but waged a sometimes systematic campaign against Muslim citizens. The gender or the age of their victims mattered not, and mutilations and assassinations of the Muslims were frequently happening at the hand of young anti-Balaka fighters. To them, all Muslims were

²⁷ Swiss Peace, "La religion n'est pas la cause du conflit en République centrafricaine", <<https://www.swisspeace.ch/apropos/die-zentralafrikanische-republik-kein-religioeser-konflikt/?lang=fr>>, accessed on 30 October 2020.

²⁸ "Anti-Balaka militia in Borab are adorned with such objects as bullets, tin cans, locks and chains which they believe are charms or fetishes with special power that will keep them safe from the bullets of the enemy" (Kam Kah, *op. cit.*, p. 40), see also *Ibidem*, p. 37.

²⁹ Deiros, Trinidad. "Central African Republic: The Invention of a Religious Conflict.", p. 8.

³⁰ According to Pew Research Center, "Table: Christian Population as Percentages of Total Population by Country", <<https://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/table-christian-population-as-percentages-of-total-population-by-country/>> and Gouvernement de la République Centrafricaine, <<http://www.minplan-rca.org/pays/>>, accessed on 22 June 2021.

foreigners that were to be killed or forcibly deported, as they had no place in a Christian society. As mentioned, mosques and other places of worship were deliberately targeted, burned or defaced with graffiti. Even Muslims sheltered in camps or departing the anti-Balaka-dominated areas were considered legitimate targets and were routinely attacked.³¹ Once partial victory was achieved by the anti-Balaka and most Muslims expelled from areas such as the capital Bangui, religious violence did not stop. Indeed, it was turned towards elderly members of the community suspected of being involved in magic and witchcraft. Some were assaulted, some were killed while the lucky ones were dragged in front of special sorcery tribunals, where judges were more lenient than angry mobs.³²

The picture of religious-inspired AGs in the CAR would not be complete without briefly discussing a rather smaller, but famous such group, now dwelling in the remote southeast of the country at some distance from the main centres of power and violence. The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is now but a pale shadow of itself, but an excellent example of how complicated is to ascribe a religious dimension even to a self-proclaimed Christian AG, fighting "in the name of God" to impose a theocracy, on the conceptual base of the Ten Commandments. While some would question even the assumption that a Christian group can perpetrate attacks on civilians given its professed beliefs, and while it is clear that for now its power and influence are fading, in 2020, for instance, it mounted some 42 attacks in the CAR, in the DRC, South Sudan and Sudan, killing 31 and kidnapping 192 persons.³³ This is a far cry from its former glory days in the early 2010s, when the US president, prompted by a social media

³¹ Yannick Weyns *et al.*, *Mapping Conflict Motives: The Central African Republic*, International Peace Information Service, 2014, pp. 53-54.

³² Marco Simoncelli, Davide Lemmi, "In Pictures: The Witch Hunts of Bangui" <<https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2020/3/24/in-pictures-the-witch-hunts-of-bangui>>, accessed on 16 June 2021.

³³ France 24, "Uganda's Brutal Lord's Resistance Army, Past and Present", <<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210506-uganda-s-brutal-lord-s-resistance-army-past-and-present>>, accessed on 11 June 2021.

campaign, sent hundreds of special forces to the African Great Lakes area to destroy the LRA and capture or kill its feared leader, Joseph Kony.³⁴ Yet somehow LRA continues to be a notorious actor in CAR's religious violence cauldron, even if only for its celebrity and eccentricity. However, one can also point out to the fact that the CAR AGs seem to have taken a page from LRA's playbook, recruiting mass numbers of child soldiers, with sources mentioning up to 10,000 soldiers serving in different AGs operating in the country.³⁵

Beginning in the late 1980s as one of the many opposition groups fighting against Uganda's strongman Yoweri Museveni, the LRA was steeped into a spiritual mode from early on, in a duality blending Old Testament beliefs with the traditional faith of the Acholi nation,³⁶ the ethnic group from which both historical leaders, Alice Lakwena and Joseph Kony as well as most of the initial fighters hailed.³⁷ This mythology was particularly severe in regards to using violence, especially fatal violence against other humans. It required first and foremost a substantial process of cleansing for the warriors, who have to do a special penance to mollify the vengeful spiritual forces and beings unleashed by the act of killing itself. These rituals were quite important for the survival of the family of the warrior itself, as the ghosts created by the process of killing would haunt not only its perpetrator, but also his family for multiple generations.

In addition to that, the Acholi tradition also involved a careful deliberation about the just nature of warfare. Legitimate war could only be

³⁴ The mission lasted for 6 years and is said to have incurred a bill of 800 million \$ for the US government, see Helene Cooper, "A Mission to Capture or Kill Joseph Kony Ends, Without Capturing or Killing", <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/15/world/africa/joseph-kony-mission-ends.html>>, accessed on 11 June 2021.

³⁵ Victor H. Mlambo, Siphesihle Mpanza, Daniel N. Mlambo, "Armed Conflict and the Increasing Use of Child Soldiers in the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Sudan: Implications for Regional Security", *Journal of Public Affairs*, 19(2), 2019.

³⁶ Victor Letha, Holly Porter, "Dirty Things: Spiritual Pollution and Life After the Lord's Resistance Army", *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 11(4), 2017, pp. 590-608.

³⁷ Sverker Finnström, "Wars of the Past and War in the Present: The Lord's Resistance Movement/Army in Uganda", *Africa*, 76(2), 2006, pp. 200-220.

waged once its just character was established, after which the war chiefs had to obtain the blessing of the elders of their communities, a ritual act involving touching the body with special wooden branches.³⁸ One might still insist on how a Christian AG - albeit involved in a "legitimate war" - can commit killings, thus openly breaching the "Thou shalt not kill" commandment. Some might argue that the very fact the LRA is a heterodox Christian AG, and not one that would see its members adhere to a specific Christian denomination (be it Protestant or Catholic), would make the observance of the Christian doctrine loose. Still, the picture becomes grimer if we consider what are generally called "The Christmas Massacres", during which, between 25 and 27 December 2008, the LRA conducted raids in churches and villages in northern Democratic Republic of Congo, killing over 400 people, fellow Christians included.³⁹

Yet these traditional ways of looking at warfare were changed, as argued by Finnström, through the increased mechanisation of warfare, including the adoption of weaponry that made remote killing possible, thus breaking the connection between the killer and his victim. Museveni's systematic counterinsurgency against the LRA in particular and the Acholi in particular, with all its brutal aspects, furthered the weakening of links between the armed group and the original community. Its fighters veered towards Kony, seen as a military and spiritual leader,⁴⁰ as well as its brand of militant Old Testament Christianity, through which it sought to openly govern Uganda according to the Decalogue. Extreme violence, mutilations, assassinations and its well-known tactic of recruiting children to serve as soldiers in its ranks were, at least in Kony's view, not incompatible with its

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ Other sources mentioned higher figures at the time, see Human Rights Watch, "DR Congo: LRA Slaughters 620 in 'Christmas Massacres'", <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/01/17/dr-congo-lra-slaughters-620-christmas-massacres>>, accessed on 22 June 2021.

⁴⁰ Christopher R. Day, " 'Survival Mode': Rebel Resilience and the Lord's Resistance Army", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 31(5), 2019, pp. 966-986.

religious message.⁴¹ And perhaps a literal reading of some passages of the Old Testament might actually support such a viewpoint, if one may venture to say so.

In time, the necessities of sheer survival against a determined campaign of Ugandan military forces have shifted the LRA towards a more pragmatic stance. While the religious foundation is still important, but increasingly remote in terms of actual implementation, the group has had to be innovative in regards to procuring weapons, food, money and lodgings. Initially, they relied on help from the Sudanese government, acting as a proxy against South Sudanese independence fighters.⁴² This is particularly interesting from a religious point of view, as Khartoum was at the time (in the 1990s and early 2000s) firmly in the grip of Hassan al-Turabi, a hardline Islamist with a history of protecting figures such as the exiled Osama bin Laden.⁴³

As this state support withered with time (though some LRA camps persisted in South Sudan until the present day), the AG had to increasingly look for subsistence by other means. One of these was, just like the case of many AGs operating in the area to the north of Africa's Great Lakes, poaching. The killing of rhinoceros, elephants, big cats and other rare animals is a well-documented phenomenon in the study of African AGs, who use the animals either as food, or, more lucratively, as "cash crops".⁴⁴ Sources attest these instances of LRA poaching rare animals, including

⁴¹ James Bevan, "The Myth of Madness: Cold Rationality and 'Resource' Plunder by the Lord's Resistance Army", *Civil Wars*, 9(4), 2007, p. 345.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ Magnus Taylor, "Hassan al-Turabi's Islamist Legacy in Sudan", <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/hassan-al-turabi-s-islamist-legacy-sudan>>, accessed on 14 June 2021.

⁴⁴ Amongst many sources see Jack Losh, "Central Africa's Rangers Are as Threatened as the Animals They Guard", *Foreign Policy*, October 6, 2019, <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/06/central-africas-rangers-are-as-endangered-as-the-animals-they-guard>>, accessed on 15 June 2021.

giraffes, in the easternmost regions of the CAR.⁴⁵ In the Garamba National Park of the CAR, they hunt elephants for ivory. If they follow patterns established since the 1980s by other Sudan-based AGs, they could sell these to networks of merchants transporting them to Kenya's ports for shipping towards their main markets in East Asia.⁴⁶ Showcasing how similar are the actions of governmental AGs with those of rebel AGs, soldiers of Ugandan armed forces sent to eastern Congo and the CAR to attack the LRA engaged in similar practices regarding poaching and illegal sale of timber in order to line up their pockets, sometimes using military vehicles for the transportation of the merchandise.⁴⁷

As these activities take more and more time and physical resources of the armed group, it is increasingly unsure how relevant is the current application of the religious label to the Lord's Resistance Army. In combination with its thorough defeat in Uganda (resulting in the inability to recruit within its ranks, by force or not, members of the Acholi community), its expelling from the northeastern DRC and its insignificant role in the politics of the CAR, it is probably more accurate to think of present-day LRA as an economic exploitative armed groups, solely concerned with its own survival.

This brief discussion of religious armed groups in the Central African Republic has highlighted how difficult it is to understand the activities of local rebel or pro-government militias according to one possible classification of AGs based on the reasons for which they use violence. Religious impulses and violence committed in the name of religion were certainly hallmarks of the Séléka and the anti-Balaka militias

⁴⁵ UN News, "Central Africa's Iconic Mammals Threatened by Poachers, Armed Groups – UN Environment Wing", <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/01/1000801>>, accessed on 15 June 2021.

⁴⁶ Gervais Ondoua Ondoua *et al.*, *An Assessment of Poaching and Wildlife Trafficking in the Garamba-Bili-Chinko Transboundary Landscape*, *Traffic Report*, December 2017 p. 4-5.

⁴⁷ Kristof Titeca, "Illegal Ivory Trade as Transnational Organized Crime? An Empirical Study into Ivory Traders in Uganda", *The British Journal of Criminology*, 59(1), 2019, pp. 24-44.

as well as the Lord's Resistance Army at some point of their history - and particularly during the initial phase of their existence. However, their initial formation as defence groups (against governmental injustice, repression, or roving bandits) also points to structural, economic and political reasons which explain their formation. Once initial goals had been met or utterly missed (as in the case of the LRA), the AGs were forced to think more and more about survival and became more akin to economic exploitative groups. Some (such as the Séléka and the anti-Balaka) were able to discover common political goals, becoming allies in a civil war against a government they see as illegitimate, thus reinforcing the political side of their motivations for using violence. All these evolutions mapped here point to the fact that when analysing individual AGs, particularly those still in existence, one needs to tread carefully between theory and facts and remove the rigidity from conceptualisations and classifications.

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