



**International School for Security Forces (EIFORCES)  
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# INSIGHTS

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## **The Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP): an expanding security threat**

### **Introduction**

The Central Africa sub-region, today, is beset by increasing security challenges. Despite the strategies of the State and those implemented by sub-regional, regional and international institutions, these challenges are becoming more acute. Part of this worsening is linked to the expansion of Islamist groups. Indeed, since the 2000s, fundamentalism has been a stumbling block for the international community. According to Chaliand and Blin (2007), terrorism is as old as it is, but it is becoming more and more entrenched. Following the muted attempts of Boko Haram on the western edge and Al-Shebab on the eastern flank of the continent, the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) has succeeded in gaining a foothold in recent years. It would be a mistake to draw a close correlation between this name and the limits of its zone of influence. Although its ambitions are known, its geographical limits are still fluid, as its network is still under construction and is seeking support in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in the Great Lakes region and in South-East Africa. What does ISCAP stand for, (its deeds) and what does it represent as a security threat that calls for

attention, with such an alarming track record (Intelbrief, 2021)?

This study focuses on the historical trajectory of the ISCAP 'sanctuary' project. Our approach takes into account the diversity of factors. In an international context marked by a reshaping of geopolitical polarities, proceeding in this way would make it possible to establish reticularity as an explanation of the birth, deployment and struggle against Islamism, as attested to by works that have observed this phenomenon in the Near East-Maghreb-Sahel axis (Pountougnigni Njuh, 2022 and 2020). ISCAP is in fact an attempt to create an additional zone of influence by Islamists in Middle Africa. This paper identifies the origins and modus operandi of ISCAP in order to determine the extent of the threats it poses and explore avenues for their control. Data indicate that ISCAP is a concrete expression of the Islamists' far-reaching expansionist pretensions in a sub-region where socio-political conditions have been in place for decades, and which can still help to establish its hold.

## **Central Africa as a long time**

### **Islamist goal**

Central Africa lives up to its name, for its geostrategic position allows it to communicate with the other African sub-regions. This is one of the reasons why it is at the crossroads of the geopolitical and geo-economic issues affecting the continent. Moreover, it is a key sub-region in the geopolitics of the continent, coveted by powers, multinationals and terrorist entities alike. For long, terrorist threats in Central Africa have remained on the doorstep of the sub-region, resulting from the spatial convergence of fundamentalisms originating in North and West Africa on the one hand, and in East Africa on the other. These fundamentalists are themselves dependent on the global 'jihad' launched from the Middle East in 1987 by Al-Qaeda (Bergen, 2006). The allegiance of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), born in 1998 and based in Algeria, allowed it to take root in North Africa. This merger gave rise to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a network of terrorist groups including the GSPC and other groups such as: Ansar al-Sharia, Boko Haram, Ansar Beït al-Maqdess, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), etc. (Pountougnigni Njuh, 2020; Daniel, 2012). With the killing of its leader, Abdelmalek Droukdel, on 3 June 2020, AQIM, strengthened by the Islamic State (IS) in West Africa, was able to extend terrorism to northwestern Central Africa through Boko Haram. Under the pretext of restoring the Kanem-Bornou Empire, where Sharia law would reign, this sect was seeking to create a territory straddling northeast Nigeria, southeast Niger, eastern Chad and northern Cameroon. Since the attack against the Cameroonian Armed Forces (FAC) in March 2014 in Fotokol (Far North Region of Cameroon), Boko Haram, although weakened by years of coordinated response between the states of the sub-region (Kouosseu and Pountougnigni Njuh, 2020), continues to commit scattered exactions.

Apart from the Maghreb-West Africa corridor, Islamists have long considered the Oman-Yemen-Horn of Africa axis to establish themselves in East Africa, the Great Lakes and Central Africa. The Somali conflict gave them a significant foothold in the Horn of Africa, especially after the 'triumph' over Western armed interference - the failure of Operation Restore Hope (9 December 1992 - 4 May 1993). Kenya, home to Siad Barre, the Somali leader who fled in 1991, overwhelmed by the civil war, became a target for Al-Qaeda. The basis of this move is to be found in Bin Laden's anti-Western rhetoric. He had already set his sights on Sudan, where he had stayed and consolidated fundamentalism from 1992 to 1995 (Bergen, 2006: 20). Having played an important role in the UN operations in Somalia under the aegis of the USA and France in 1992-1993, Kenya thus fell into its sights. This is how Al-Qaeda committed attacks against the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar-Es-Salaam (Tanzania) on 7 August 1998. On 28 November 2002, another one targeted the Paradise Hotel in Mombasa (Kenya), owned by an Israeli. In 2006, the Al-Shebab group was created in Somalia. Following its allegiance to Al-Qaeda, it expanded its activities in East Africa (Agbiboa, 2014: 29-31) as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Al-Shebab abuses in Uganda and Kenya between 2010 and 2020.**

Dates	Exactions
2010	Attack in Kampala, Uganda
24 October 2011	Bus explosion in Nairobi
5 November 2011	Church attack in Garissa, Kenya
24 November 2011	Hotel attack in Garissa
31 December 2011	Bus attack in Garissa
21-24 September 2013	Attack on Westgate Shopping Centre in Nairobi
2 April 2015	Attack on Garissa University campus

15-16 January 2019	Attacks in Riverside Drive, Nairobi
5 January 2020	Attack on the US-Kenyan military base in Lamu (northern coast of Kenya)

(By Pountougnigni Njuh).

Exactions by Al-Shebab demonstrate the intention of Islamists not only to settle in East Africa, but also to move towards the Great Lakes Region and Central Africa, as illustrated by Bin Laden's activities in Sudan, and especially the Al-Shebab attack in Kampala in 2010. It is therefore clear that Islamists have been trying to establish themselves in Central Africa for decades. The birth of ISCAP five years ago shows how well they have succeeded. However, the conditions that have prevailed since independence in the Great Lakes region have given them a boost.

### **The Great Lakes region as fertile ground**

Though Islamists did not succeed in establishing themselves in Central Africa through their own efforts, it is the vulnerability of the Lakes Region to ongoing armed conflict that provided the opportunity for ISCAP to gain a foothold in Central Africa, particularly in eastern DRC. Indeed, the Great Lakes have always been the soft underbelly of efforts to build a security community in Central Africa. Since independence, conflicts have littered the history of this part of the continent. Apart from frequent coups d'état and civil wars in Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR), the situation is particularly tragic in the Great Lakes, as shown in the table below:

**Table 2: Overview of some armed conflicts cases in the Great Lakes Region since independence**

Country	Conflicts
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Burundi	Failed coup and massacre of Hutus in 1965 and 1972; civil war in 1988; coup in 1996.
Congo-Kinshasa (today's DRC)	Katangese secessionism (1960-1963); coup d'état in 1965; rebellions in Shaba in 1977-1978; rebellion and coup in 1996-1997; civil war in 1998.
Uganda	Coups d'état and political instability in 1966, 1971, 1979, 1988.
Rwanda	Failed coup and massacre of Tutsis in 1963; coup in 1973 and genocide in 1994

(Sources: Dunn, 2003; Chrétien, 1997; Reyntjens, 2009; Fofack, 2012. Realisation: Pountougnigni Njuh).

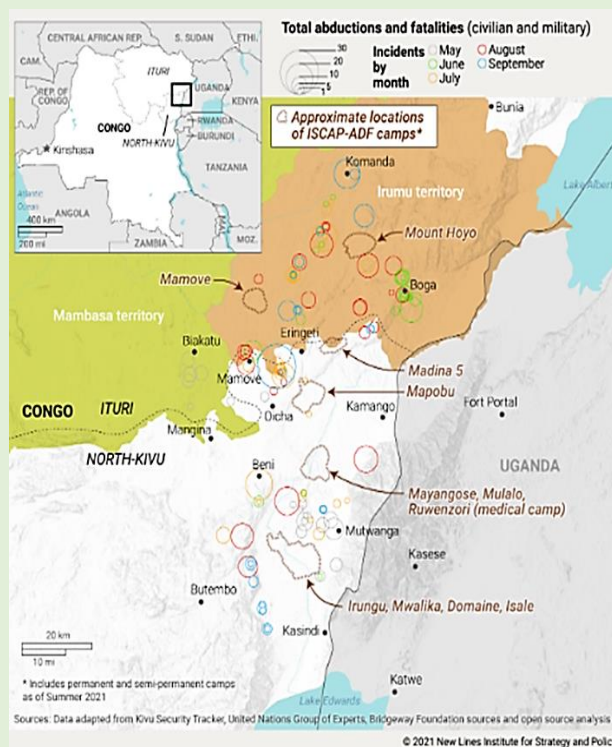
The Great Lakes Region has been a conflict zone in Central Africa for seven decades, torn between coups d'état, civil wars and rebellions. According to Grira and Ben Said (2016), this sub-region 'had the highest concentration of rebel groups in Africa (nearly 80 according to various sources)'. This situation fostered a favourable climate for the expansion of Islamist groups. Exhausted by years of struggle and in search of support, some rebel groups recently changed their strategy, going beyond the usual trafficking (arms, mining resources, hostage-taking, etc.). They are now forging alliances with the Islamists.

Indeed, in the past, rebel movements had emerged on religious lines: Séléka vs. anti-balaka in CAR; Muslims vs. Christians in Sudan; the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, etc. However, these movements did not have allegiance to a 'multinational' terrorist organisation. However, this has become fashionable among certain groups that make Central Africa a 'jihadist magnet' (Le Temps, 2021). ISCAP was born of an alliance between the Islamic State (EI) and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). ISIS (or Daesh) is an Islamist group founded in 1999. It pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda in the wake of the insurgency sparked by the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

After Bin Laden was killed in April 2011, ISIS proclaimed itself a global caliphate in 2014 and took up the torch of "jihad". It thus followed in the footsteps of the expansionist project of Al-Qaeda in West Africa -IS in West Africa (Pountounigni Njuh, 2020). Therefore, its establishment in Central Africa has been facilitated by ADF.

Created in 1995 in Uganda, the ADF retreated to the east of the former Zaïre (now DRC) following military pressure (Arieff, 2022: 1). Its focus was then shifted from opposition to Kampala to recently participating in the spread of Islamism. Some early indicators made it inclined towards this. Jamil Mukulu, who led it at its inception, was a member of the Tablighi Jamaat (World Sunni Muslim Renewal Movement). At the beginning of the rebellion, he recruited mainly among Ugandan Muslims. In 2007, however, some of its fighters criticized the Salafism that was gaining ground within the group and laid down their arms (O'Farrell, 2021). Although weakened, the ADF still maintains its Islamist ideology. According to Tribune de Genève (2019), the group's radicalism began to take shape in the eastern DRC, where several people were killed between October 2014 and 2019. In April 2015, the group suffered a destabilising blow when Mukulu was arrested in Tanzania. Seka Musa Baluku, who took over the reins in 2016, began to look for new support. He had in mind the IS, which, in 2017, began to support the ADF financially. The latter's allegiance to IS was sealed in April 2019 (O'Farrell, 2021). Like AQMI, which was once born after the GSPC's allegiance to Al-Qaeda, the ADF has for the past five years been the basic link in a terrorist network which the IS is building in Central Africa. This alliance has spawned ISCAP, which has several crimes on its record, including the attack on the Congolese Armed Forces (FARDC) in Kamango and Bovata on 18 April 2019. Since then, its area of influence in the east of the DRC has increased, as illustrated by the map below.

**Map: ISCAP's territorial positions in Eastern DRC as of September 2021**



(Source: O'Farrell, 2021).

Backed by its local armed wing (ADF), ISCAP has been advancing towards the Great Lakes since last year. Indeed, on 16 November 2021, Kampala was targeted by an attack. The horror it sowed was such that in May 2021, the Congolese authorities declared a state of siege in North Kivu and Ituri. But still, the situation seems difficult to contain. The unpreparedness and excesses of the military towards civilians constituted obstacles to the effectiveness of the fight (Pole Institute, 2022). Moreover, the redeployment of the March 23 Movement (M23), a rebel group also based in eastern DRC, further complicates the situation. Other indicators suggest that it could be worse if strategies to combat it are not thought out and deployed immediately.

## **Dealing with ISCAP**

In the light of factors such as its rapid expansion and the damage already caused by its modus operandi, and therefore beyond any sense of gloom, ISCAP should be registered as a threat to security which African States and populations should be concerned about. The perpetuation of



rebel movements, the impoverishment of the masses and the recurrence of diplomatic tensions between States are weaknesses on which ISCAP is building to gain ground and spread terror.

In search of support, other armed entities may emulate the ADF, i.e. pledge allegiance to the EI and help it expand the ISCAP network. One group has already done so in Mozambique, a country that borders the Great Lakes Region to the south: Ansar al-Sunnah, an insurgent and fundamentalist group that became active in October 2017 in Cabo Delgado, in the north of the country (Mahtani et al., 2021; Rémy, 2020). In 2018, it also claimed responsibility as the operational arm of ISCAP. On 4 June 2019, it engaged in an attack on the Mozambique Armed Defence Forces (FADM) in Mitopy. Three months later, it made allegiance to the IS, precisely in July 2019. On behalf of ISCAP, Ansar al-Sunnah has already committed several crimes, including the massacre of 52 civilians on 7 April 2020 in Xitaxi for resisting enlistment (Morier-Genoud, 2018; Rémy, 2020).

The Northern part of Mozambique bordering the South East of the DRC and Tanzania, whose capital was shelled in August 1998 as mentioned above, does not remain safe from ISCAP's expansion. Since 2012, the country's stability has been under double threat from the Uamsho, a Muslim separatist movement, and the Civic United Front (CUF), which claims independence for Zanzibar (Webb, 2012). In north-eastern Mozambique, Malawi could also be targeted by ISCAP. Its population is approximately 14% Muslim and suffers from poverty, as destitution often to rebellion. Boko Haram took advantage of this situation to establish itself in north-eastern Nigeria and northern Cameroon in the years 2000-2010 (International Crisis Group, 2016). Besides, if Ansar al-Sunnah attacks this country - as the ADF is doing by crossing the Ugandan-Congolese border - Malawi is likely to fall under the control of ISCAP without any difficulty.

Thus, ISCAP represents a collective security threat. In Central Africa and the Great Lakes

Region, where security cooperation often comes up against leadership conflicts, the ongoing expansion of ISCAP is a cause for concern. Its sprawling and cross-border nature reduces the effectiveness of any isolated initiative. As a terrorist network in the making, it deserves the attention of both the states of the sub-region and the African Union (AU), not to mention the international community, even though the Peace Operations (POs) deployed so far in the sub-region have had a mixed outcome (Craze, 2021; Autesserre, 2010). In fact, the perspective of a synergy in fighting terrorism calls for vigorous action on the part of the states of the sub-region. These include not only the pooling of information between them, but also the pooling of resources, as well as cooperation within the framework, possibly, of a joint force. The political will to create a sustainable security community is the foundation of all this. Indeed, in October and November 2021, Kampala declared its readiness to help fight the ADF on Congolese soil with Kinshasa's approval (Al-Lami, 2021). But this is not enough. Central Africa and the Great Lakes Region is more than two countries. ISCAP is not a stopgap for other states that would be better off getting involved.

The accession of the DRC to the East African Community (EAC) on 29 March 2022, as well as the prospect of a merger between the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), also nourish the hope of a reduction in leadership conflicts between states in favour of a synergy against ISCAP, which represents a collective threat. However, it would be good practice for the implementation of these strategies to avoid the usual administrative delays, diplomatic negotiations and endless talks.

## **Conclusion**

There are several indications that the security situation in Central Africa has become alarming since the emergence of ISCAP. This terrorist

network has connections and resources to thrive in the sub-region, with serious prospects of expanding to the eastern and southern parts of the African continent. It represents a hybrid threat insofar as it is also carried by fighters of a new type: "fundamentalist rebels". Straddling local and transnational protagonists, ISCAP is the result of a meeting of interests between the rebels seeking support to continue to operate in the Great Lakes, on the one hand, and IS in search of opportunities to expand in Central Africa on the other hand. Consequently, the threat it poses is growing and worthy of attention before its spread. Therefore, security cooperation provides an avenue that can still be effective before it reaches this dimension.

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