

Congo Research  
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Groupe d'Étude  
sur le Congo



# The Landscape of Armed Groups in the Eastern Congo

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CONGO RESEARCH GROUP | GROUP D'ETUDE SUR LE CONGO

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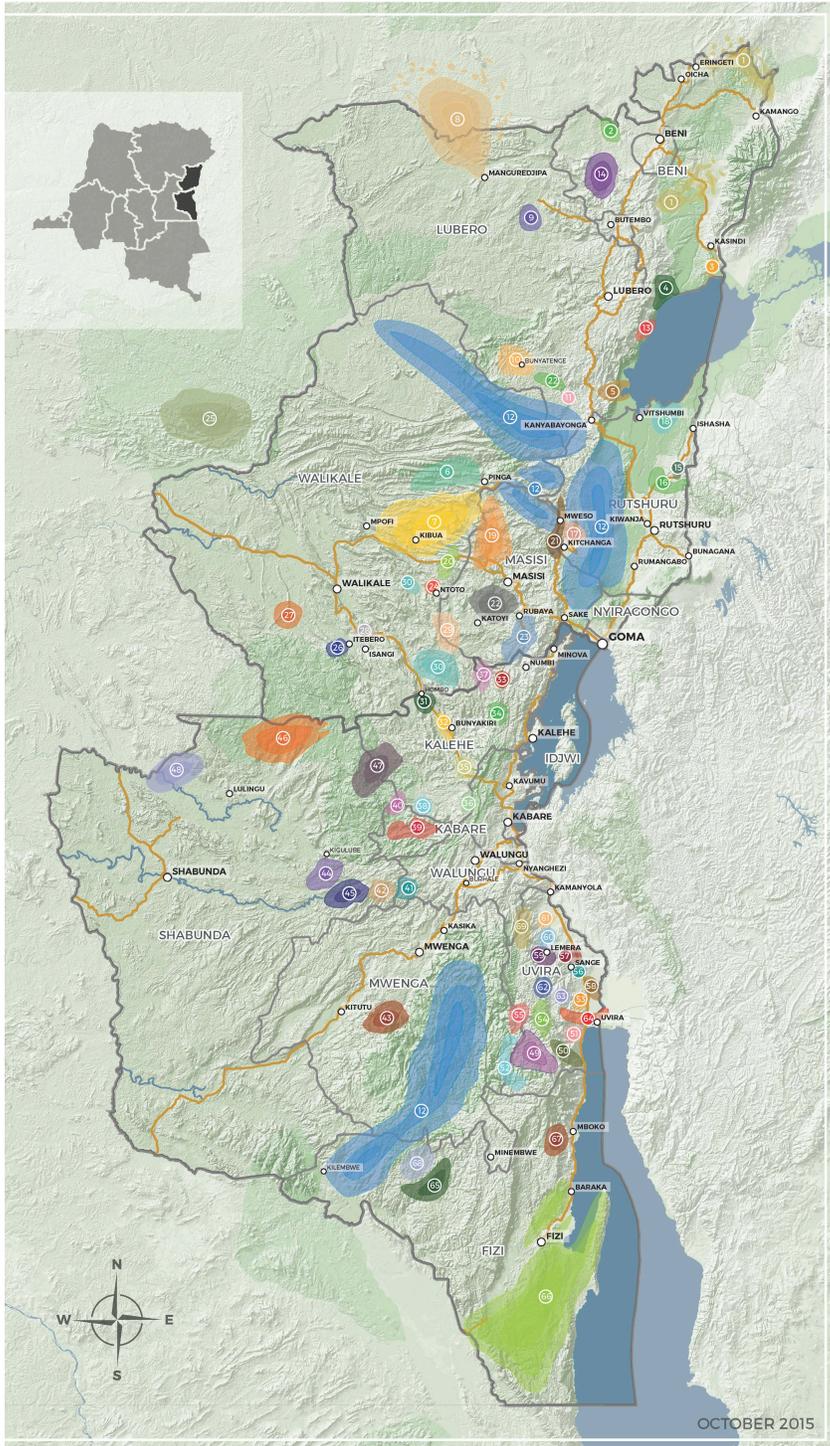
# The Landscape of Armed Groups in the Eastern Congo

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>The Decline of the Regional</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The Clustering of Conflict</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Fragmentation</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>ANNEX: Methodological Notes</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>About the Authors</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Endnotes</b>	<b>10</b>

# ARMED GROUPS IN NORTH AND SOUTH KIVU



- 1 ADF
- 2 FOLC-Kandanga
- 3 Kasindiens
- 4 Mayi-Mayi Nguru
- 5 MPLC
- 6 NDC-Sheka
- 7 NDC-Guidon
- 8 Mayi Mayi Manu (ex-Morgan)
- 9 FDK
- 10 UPCP-Lafontaine
- 11 UPCP-Damaceni
- 12 FDLR-FOCA
- 13 Mayi-Mayi PRM/PAREM
- 14 Mayi-Mayi Vurundo
- 15 Kambale group (ex-Soki)
- 16 FDLR-RUD
- 17 Nyatura-Domi (ex-Muchoma/Vutura)
- 18 AFAPRM Mayi Mayi Charles (ex-Shetani)
- 19 APCLS
- 20 FDC-Guides
- 21 Nyatura-FDDH
- 22 Nyatura-Delta
- 23 Nyatura-Kalume
- 24 MAC
- 25 Mayi Mayi Simba Kachimuka
- 26 Raia Mutomboki Akilo
- 27 Raia Mutomboki Mirage
- 28 Raia Mutomboki Elenge
- 29 Mayi-Mayi Kifuafua Limenzi
- 30 Mayi-Mayi Kifuafua Delphin
- 31 Raia Mutomboki Shukuru
- 32 Raia Mutomboki Hamakombo
- 33 Raia Mutomboki Musole
- 34 Raia Mutomboki Butachibera
- 35 Raia Mutomboki Mweeke
- 36 Raia Mutomboki Imani Bitaa
- 37 Mayi-Mayi Kirikicho
- 38 Raia Mutomboki Blaise
- 39 Raia Mutomboki Lukoba
- 40 Raia Mutomboki Kashungushungu
- 41 Raia Mutomboki Maheshe
- 42 Raia Mutomboki Ndarumanga
- 43 Mayi-Mayi Nyakiliba
- 44 Raia Mutomboki Mabala
- 45 Raia Mutomboki Makombo
- 46 Raia Mutomboki Takulengwe
- 47 Raia Mutomboki Donat/Ngandu
- 48 Raia Mutomboki Kazimoto (ex-Kikuni)
- 49 Nyamusharaba (ex-Tawimbi)
- 50 Mayi-Mayi Toto
- 51 Mayi-Mayi Fujo
- 52 LDF Hauts Plateaux
- 53 Mayi-Mayi Nyerere
- 54 Mayi-Mayi Mushombe
- 55 Mayi-Mayi Mahoro
- 56 Mayi-Mayi Karakara/Amuse-Gueulle
- 57 Mayi-Mayi Simusizi
- 58 Mayi-Mayi Gere-Kilolo
- 59 LDF Intervention
- 60 LDF Moliere
- 61 LDF Mahinduzi
- 62 LDF Santos
- 63 LDF Kashumba
- 64 FNL-Nzabampema
- 65 Mayi-Mayi Mulumba
- 66 Mayi-Mayi Yakutumba
- 67 Mayi-Mayi Bwasakala/Reunion (FPC)
- 68 Mayi-Mayi MDLC (Chochi/Yenga)
- 69 Rushombo Group

An essay explaining key trends in armed mobilization and our methodology can be found at [www.congoresearchgroup.org](http://www.congoresearchgroup.org) and [www.christophvogel.net](http://www.christophvogel.net)

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## THE LANDSCAPE OF ARMED GROUPS IN THE EASTERN CONGO

Two years ago, Congolese armed forces celebrated a historic victory against the M23 rebellion, raising hopes that the cycle of violence in the eastern Congo was petering out. Today, however, disappointment has set in. At least seventy armed groups are active in the eastern Congo, and approximately 1.6 million people remain displaced. The various approaches taken by the Congolese government and its foreign partners—including the stabilization program, demobilization efforts, and security sector reform—have produced meager results.

Who are these armed groups? The Congo Research Group has mapped around seventy armed groups and their areas of influence in North and South Kivu, drawing on original field research (for earlier maps on which this exercise is based, [see here](#)). Most of these groups are small, not numbering more than 200 soldiers, and recruit largely along ethnic lines. This short essay outlines some of the main trends we can observe in the conflict in recent years.

### THE DECLINE OF THE REGIONAL

The demise of the M23 marked a historic low of regional interference in the eastern Congo. For the first time since 1996, the Rwandan government does not have a serious ally in this region. Even if Rwanda wanted to mobilize again, it would not be easy: Congolese Tutsi and Hutu occupy prominent positions in the *Forces armées de la République Démocratique du Congo* (FARDC) but many of them harbor deep resentment against their erstwhile allies in Kigali. The few rwandophone belligerents that remain, like the various Nyatura and the Nyamusharaba groups, are either small in size, not very active, or in opposition to Rwanda.

This decline in the regional dimension of the conflict can also be perceived in the rhetoric of some of the remaining armed groups. While anti-Tutsi and anti-Rwandan sentiment used to figure among their main justifications, the government in Kinshasa has become the main object of their invective.

Despite these developments, the strongest and most disruptive armed groups in the eastern Congo include foreign ones. In post-M23 eastern Congo, the *Rwandan Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR) is by far the largest armed group, both in terms of numbers as well as geographic spread. The FDLR maintains varying degrees of influence—either alone or together with the army, other militias, or state administration—in considerable parts of Walikale, Lubero, Rutshuru, Masisi (North Kivu), Mwenga, Uvira, and Fizi territories (South Kivu). While there are contradictory claims regarding the group's strength, it probably numbers between 1,000 and 2,500 troops, several times larger than any other armed group in the area. It is, however, important to highlight that the group has been unable to launch any major raids into Rwanda since 2001. Its importance with regards to Rwanda is therefore more as a symbolic threat, as many of their leaders were members of the Rwandan army that helped organize the genocide in 1994.

Besides the FDLR, two other foreign armed groups continue to operate in the Kivus: the Ugandan Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and the Nzabampema wing of the *Burundian Forces nationales de libération* (FNL). Both groups are small, the former no more than 300 troops and the latter probably half that size, but remain important. The ADF has been a key player in a series of massacres around the town of Beni, arguably the worst violence the country has seen in a decade. Here, too, however, it is important to highlight that the group, whose commander Jamil Mukulu was arrested this year, has largely given up on its ambition to overthrow

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the Ugandan government and has become deeply embedded in local dynamics, making it somewhat misleading to highlight its foreign nature.

Similarly, Nzabampema's FNL were a marginal group until early this year, involved in cattle rustling and cross-border raids from their base in the Rusizi Plain. However--and this is where this regional trend could be reversed--the recent escalation in conflict in Burundi has seen the remobilization of many ex-FNL combatants in the province of Bujumbura Rural, raising the possibility of an intensification of cross-border troubles, although probably through other, still inchoate groups.

## THE CLUSTERING OF CONFLICT

As the map shows, armed groups are scattered throughout the Kivutian highlands, but are much less present in the sparsely populated lowlands to the west--large parts of Mwenga and Shabunda are examples of this. Most of the fighting is clustered in other areas where a variety of armed groups are opposed to each other, or where the FARDC conducts military operations. Several such hot spots can be identified:

- The border between Walikale and Masisi territories: Nine different armed groups are clustered in this area, which has also been the focus of recent FARDC Sukola II operations against both the FDLR and the *Alliance des patriotes pour un Congo libre et souverain* (APCLS), but is also the scene of fighting within the Nduma Defense of Congo (NDC) armed group (two wings, led by Commanders Guidon and Sheka, have clashed repeatedly), as well as between the NDC and the APCLS, and the NDC and the FDLR, and a few smaller militias crystallizing around these cleavages;
- The Rusizi Plain: This is the area with the highest density of armed groups in the Congo--we could count fifteen, including groups based in the Moyen Plateau overlooking the plains. Conflicts here involve historical disputes between the Rundi, Banyamulenge, and Fuliuro communities--as well as within these communities--over land and power that have drawn in and been instrumentalized by political elites in Uvira and Bukavu;
- FARDC offensives: The worst displacement in the Kivus typically occurs in areas where the national army conducts counterinsurgency operations. This is currently the case in the foothills of the Ruwenzori mountains east of Beni (Operation Sukola I), as well as in the border of Masisi, Walikale, and Rutshuru territories (Operation Sukola II);

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## FRAGMENTATION

The most obvious trend among armed groups has been fragmentation. While there have not been similar mapping exercises in the past, according to Congolese and United Nations estimates, there were probably no more than twenty armed groups in the Kivus in January 2008.<sup>1</sup>

As other scholars have argued<sup>2</sup>, several factors have led to this proliferation of armed groups. First, the simple lack of alternatives, especially the failure or absence of sound demobilization programs, produced factionalization and generated security dilemmas at the very local level. Most armed groups had never been very cohesive, and over time the lack of military pressure, the ample space and resources at their disposal, and the government's failure to offer their members alternative livelihoods led them to splinter into multiple groups. Most of the groups present today--certain Raia Mutomboki groups are an exception to this<sup>3</sup>--are factions of previous ones.

These dynamics were compounded by political developments brought about, ironically, by the peace process. Both the Global and Inclusive Agreement of 2002, which ushered in a transitional government, and a series of failed DDR and army integration efforts contributed to a fragmentation of the political arena, which was then reproduced among armed groups. Provincial and national parliaments were created, and political parties multiplied. Some of these leaders politicians resorted to armed groups as a means of intimidating their rivals and bolstering their reputations as strongmen as violence became as means of political leverage. This, in turn, led to an escalation of violence as politicians and local communities mobilized in response to each other--a sort of security dilemma compounded by a competition for political power and patronage.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the peace process forged a large, fractious army out of the former belligerents. The government used the FARDC to dole out patronage, both in order to co-opt its armed rivals, as well as to reward loyalists and to keep its large officer corps occupied in the east of the country.<sup>5</sup> As a result, armed mobilization became a revolving door, as discontent army officers would defect in order to negotiate better positions, often supported by opportunistic politicians. These perverse incentives were a key factor in the proliferation of armed groups.<sup>6</sup>

This instrumentalization of violence, however, began to ebb after the 2011 elections. The government decided to stop negotiating wholesale with armed groups--groups would no longer be rewarded with positions and cash payouts. While the government has not been consistent with this policy--negotiations with the FRPI and the Yakutumba Mai Mai have been exceptions, although neither came fully to fruition--it appears that this kind of revolving door military integration has subsided. It is possible, however, that this policy, while necessary, may have further fragmentation, as armed group leaders lose their authority as negotiators with the central government.

Finally, the persistence of local conflict has provided fertile ground for armed groups to mobilize. These conflicts, often driven by struggles over customary succession or land, have often been politicized and seized upon by political elites in the region. struggles over customary succession or land, have often been politicized and seized upon by political elites in the region.<sup>7</sup>

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## THE RISE OF THE MILITARY APPROACH

While it is encouraging to see an end to Kinshasa's incessant negotiations<sup>8</sup> with armed groups, the result has been a single-mindedly military approach to the conflict, both by the Congolese government and the UN peacekeeping mission. Despite two rounds of a stabilization program, the government and its foreign partners have been unable to create a virtuous cycle of economic development in the rural Kivus that could entice local leaders to invest in stability rather than conflict.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the government has been slow to hold its army officers involved in racketeering and the support of armed groups accountable, and had dragged its feet in implementing its new demobilization plan.

As a result, the Kivus are left with a military strategy that lacks much of a complementary diplomatic or peacebuilding effort.

## ANNEX: METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

Mapping non-state armed groups is, like many other illicit phenomena,<sup>10</sup> a sensitive task and will inevitably involve imprecisions, especially since new armed groups pop up every month, and their deployments are in constant flux. The aim here is inform a conversation about the complexity of the conflict and armed group activity in the eastern Congo. We welcome comments and criticism; indeed, this will help us improve the next, updated version.

This map is the result of extensive fieldwork conducted by a network of researchers based in Uvira, Bukavu, Goma, and Butembo, and has benefited from several rounds of internal and external reviews by experts on conflict dynamics in this region.

### A few additional comments:

- This map is limited to North and South Kivu;
- We map 'zones of influence' rather than absolute control. While some armed groups exert effective control over an area, others may be able to exert substantial influence over larger zones but lack full control over those areas. By zones of influence, we include both kinds of influence. Hence the size of an armed group area does not necessarily correspond to its strength;
- The conflict in the Kivus is dynamic and any such mapping is quickly outdated. This map represents the situation in October 2015;
- We cannot account for certain armed actors. All groups included in this mapping have the following qualities: a self-perception as armed group, an identifiable leadership and approximate structure, and the existence of combatants and arms. While banditry is increasing in certain parts of the Kivu--most notably around Beni and between Lubero and Rutshuru territories--we do not consider these actors as armed groups. Nonetheless, we have included actors ranging from micro-militias with no more than 10 to 20 combatants to large-scale, sophisticated groups such as the FDLR.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## ENDNOTES

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