

# Lord's Resistance Army Culture Provides Opening to Prevent Attacks and Advance Humanitarian Efforts

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**Abstract:** A recent increase in defections from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)—a Central Africa-based religious militia—has resulted in a rise in violent, survival-motivated lootings of local villages and nongovernmental organization (NGO) outposts perpetrated by former LRA members who are deterred from rejoining their home communities by perceived resentment and hostility among local community members. These ongoing hostilities have compounded an existing humanitarian crisis in Central Africa and intensified regional instability. Cultural data show that if NGOs partnered with local leaders, reintegrated LRA defectors, and tailored their reintegration narratives to appeal to LRA cultural biases, they are more likely to preserve NGO resources through a sustainable decrease in attacks and an increase in successful reintegration efforts.

**Keywords:** Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, humanitarian aid, Central Africa, terrorism, reintegration, culture

## Introduction

For the past several decades, Central Africa has been characterized by violent conflict, poverty, and social unrest. This is in no small part due to the abhorrent actions of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a religious terrorist group operating in Uganda, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Central African Republic. The LRA was established in 1987 by self-proclaimed prophet Joseph Kony for the purpose of overthrowing the Ugandan government and replacing it with a spiritually oriented system governed by the Ten Commandments of Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

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*Journal of Advanced Military Studies* Strategic Culture  
2022

[www.usmcu.edu/mcupress](http://www.usmcu.edu/mcupress)

<https://doi.org/10.21140/mcu.j.2022SIstratcul011>

As the momentum of the LRA has slowed during the past few years, the religious militia has seen a substantial outflow of mid-to-low-level members. Many of these defectors, however, have chosen to live apart from society and are attacking NGO outposts and nearby villages to obtain food and resources rather than return to their home communities—effectively obstructing the flow of essential aid to an impoverished and unstable region. However, an analysis of the cultural biases—identity, perceptual lens, values, and norms—of defecting mid-to-low-level LRA members provides three clear openings for the prevention of attacks and the successful reintegration of these individuals into local communities. Following an analysis of LRA cultural biases and the opportunities they provide is a discussion of the scenarios that are likely to result from the pursuit or dismissal of these opportunities.

This assessment and the associated recommendations were produced using the Cultural Topography Framework, a structured analytic technique employed within the U.S. intelligence community to facilitate the inclusion of critical cultural data into strategic assessments and decisions.<sup>2</sup> The cultural data used in this discussion were largely compiled through content analysis of publicly accessible online video interviews and first-person accounts of interactions and experiences with the Lord's Resistance Army. Cultural data were also drawn from reports from humanitarian NGOs operating in Central Africa and news from local communities and villages in the surrounding areas.

### **The Crippling Effect of the LRA**

For more than 30 years, Kony and his followers have employed vicious, violent intimidation tactics to further their crusade—terrorizing local communities, intensifying preexisting humanitarian crises and regional instability, and presenting significant obstacles to the distribution of humanitarian aid. The LRA is notorious for brutally attacking communities and abducting local children to serve as soldiers or sex slaves after mutilating, raping, or killing other villagers. Even today, local community members live in constant fear that they or their relatives will be killed or kidnapped by LRA forces, and their fears are not unfounded. The United Nations National Security Council estimates that more than 100,000 people have been killed by LRA forces, and between 60,000 and 100,000 children have been abducted and forced to commit atrocities for Kony's crusade since the group's emergence in 1987.<sup>3</sup> Additional estimates from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) show that more than 2.5 million people have been displaced internally or across borders as a result of LRA conflicts.<sup>4</sup>

The terror felt by these communities is compounded by the extreme poverty that much of the region already experiences. The countries in which the LRA operates—Uganda, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and the Central African Republic (CAR)—are some of the poorest in the world. The DRC and the CAR are ranked among the bottom five nations on the United Nations' global Multidimensional Poverty Index and the CAR

is listed on the Global Hunger Index as the only nation in the world with extremely alarming hunger levels—the DRC and South Sudan are listed as experiencing hunger levels of significant concern.<sup>5</sup> Many individuals in Central Africa are in dire need of essential aid, such as food, clean water, or medical services, but are blocked from accessing the programs that could provide these resources due to LRA-related violence.

The attacks perpetrated by LRA members and the ensuing regional instability have made Central Africa one of the most dangerous regions in the world for foreigners and forced Western NGOs to halt much-needed humanitarian operations in the region.<sup>6</sup> Ty Erickson, a recognized surgeon and philanthropist who serves as an advisor to medically oriented humanitarian organizations, noted that although the need is decidedly greatest in Central Africa, he often advises NGOs to choose a more stable region in which to set up their operations.<sup>7</sup>

During the past few years, reports show that Joseph Kony's influence is decreasing and the LRA is losing momentum. Data from Invisible Children, an NGO dedicated to tracking the LRA, show an increase in LRA defections since 2016 and a decrease in the number of combatants per faction since 2012.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, analysis of the data collected by the organization show a significant expansion and diffusion in the geographic distribution of LRA-associated attacks from 2009 to 2020—indicating a separation of LRA forces and a decrease in group coordination.<sup>9</sup>

Even though the LRA organization is weakening, its crippling impact on the region continues unabated. As LRA members separate from the militant group, many are choosing to live as refugees rather than rejoin their communities and are attacking local villages to obtain resources. As LRA defections increase, NGOs are also seeing an increase in violent lootings of their outposts and offices—resulting in the loss of valued humanitarian resources and an increase in regional instability.<sup>10</sup>

### **LRA Defectors: Mostly Refugees Motivated by Survival**

An analysis of cultural data concerning mid-to-low level members of the LRA reveals the potential motivation of these attacks and an avenue for prevention. Defecting LRA members have experienced a shift in their identity. Many now consider themselves mistreated refugees rather than crusaders—providing an opportunity for humanitarian NGOs to prevent survival-motivated attacks by clearly including the perpetrators as potential recipients of NGO aid. LRA efforts to recruit members and establish dominance in the region have intensified an existing humanitarian crisis in Central Africa and complicated efforts to assist displaced populations. The impact of the organization is most pronounced for individuals who were forcibly abducted as youths and have suffered a conflation of their previous identity and the one imposed on them by the LRA.

Throughout the history of the LRA, Joseph Kony and his followers have largely supplemented their forces by abducting youth from local communities

and coercing them into fighting for the group. Some experts believe that up to 80 percent of LRA forces were abducted as children.<sup>11</sup> These soldiers were manipulated through violent intimidation and forced to dissociate themselves from their former lives. Shortly after arriving at LRA camps, most abductees were forced to participate in “registration,” which consisted of a three-day beating intended “to remove the civilian life and school ideology from [abductees] and transition [them] to the military.”<sup>12</sup> Additionally, many escapees recall that on the night of their capture, LRA commanders intimidated new recruits into compliance by selecting one abductee to be killed, flogged, or mutilated in front of the others and promising that the same punishment would befall any who disobeyed an order or attempted to escape. In many cases, the recruits were forced to perform the punishment.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to this violent manipulation, LRA leaders attempted to emotionally separate new soldiers from their previous identity by placing strict taboos around anything that connected LRA members to their former communities—such as playing the calabash, which is used as musical accompaniment for important cultural ceremonies throughout the region, or using slang words and phrases popular in local communities.<sup>14</sup> Many abductees were even called by a different name while in the LRA in an effort to separate their LRA identity from their familial identity. One former LRA member who was abducted as a child alongside their brother was told to forget their family name because they had left the old family for their “LRA brothers” and the name no longer applied.<sup>15</sup>

Not only has the LRA attempted to strip recruits of their previous identities, but group leaders have also endeavored to foist new ones on them by replacing community roots with well-established roles in the LRA society and synthetic family relationships. The LRA is consistently referred to by group leaders as a big family. When new members are abducted, they are placed under the command of a mid-level LRA lieutenant or sergeant and referred to as the “child” of that leader.<sup>16</sup> Soldiers are also encouraged to establish family units by selecting a wife from the young women who were abducted as sex slaves and brought to the camp as rewards for bravery in battle.<sup>17</sup> Subsequently, having a wife (or multiple wives) and children is seen as a status enhancer within the LRA community. For example, group leader Joseph Kony is estimated to have fathered more than 50 children with abducted girls and was known to frequently comment on the value of family bonds during his weekly sermons.<sup>18</sup> The idea of an LRA family is used as the underlying structure for much of the terrorist organization, and commanders have often defended their actions with statements such as “we are not kidnapping anyone. We are uniting our brothers and sisters.”<sup>19</sup> As a result of this mental and physical manipulation, most abductees formed strong bonds with other LRA members and often grew to consider LRA camps their new, if unloved, homes. In interviews, several LRA defectors commented that although they did not agree with the actions they were forced to commit while fighting with the group, they felt accepted within the LRA

family and believed that other forcibly recruited LRA members were their “dear and true friends.”<sup>20</sup>

Although the experiences of each LRA member vary greatly, almost all are traumatic and transformative. The life story of Moses Rubangangeyo, a former LRA child soldier who shared his story with journalist Michael Shapiro, serves as a great example of this.

Moses was 16 years old when he and 40 of his classmates were abducted from his school in northern Uganda. Tied together at the waist and forced to walk past the bodies of the men who had guarded their school, they were led to an LRA camp deep in the bush. They were greeted by an LRA commander who welcomed them to their new family by holding them at gunpoint while other soldiers began a three-day long beating, which not all of Moses’s friends survived.

Two months after his abduction, Moses “earned” his first gun by killing a Ugandan soldier during a battle with government forces. The following month, he participated in his first abduction, violently kidnapping 139 young girls from the Catholic school down the street from his old school. While returning from that trip, Moses perpetrated his first attack against a villager—following an order to cut off a man’s legs with a dull hatchet as punishment for riding a bicycle near an LRA camp, something that Kony had declared a sin. Around the same time, he watched a boy from his induction group punish an attempted defector by skinning him alive. Moses recalls this experience as the moment when he realized the futility of escape attempts and the imperative to embrace life as an LRA soldier.

When Moses was 20 years old, he was promoted to the rank of sergeant and given a 16-year-old wife as a reward for his “faith and loyalty.” The next year, he was given a second wife and entrusted with the command of 36 new recruits. He welcomed his “children” to the brigade by abusing them as he had been. Several years later, Moses saw his father for the first time in nearly seven years and learned that his teenage girlfriend had given birth to his daughter—a six-year-old girl who believed her father was dead. Moses’s father implored him to return home, but Moses, fearing retribution from the families of village members that he had personally killed, chose to remain with the militia. A week later, Moses learned his father had committed suicide, dispirited by his son’s refusal to rejoin his family.

After being severely beaten by his superiors for failing to prevent the escape of several child soldiers, he finally decided

to abandon his home of nine years. Since the night he was awakened by his LRA captors in his school dormitory, Moses says he has not felt as though he belonged anywhere and worries that he may never feel accepted by his peers again.<sup>21</sup>

Moses's experience mirrors the stories of other LRA soldiers and demonstrates the disruptive power that the group has on the identities of its members.

Although group members were subject to constant manipulation techniques intended to turn them into LRA crusaders, most have not been permanently persuaded to align with Kony's cause. As international efforts to capture Kony and other militia leaders continue, LRA forces have fractured and members have transitioned to fighting for survival rather than for the sake of the group. Subsequently, the number of mid- to low-level members who have deserted the core group has increased, and group members have experienced yet another shift in their identity. After leaving the group, many of these individuals have expressed that they do not feel responsible for LRA actions and that their time within the LRA is not reflective of their personal values. A number of returned LRA members, ranging from mid-level officers to rebel brides and child soldiers have stated in interviews that they do not feel guilty for anything that they did during their time with the LRA or for any atrocities committed by other members because they were simply following Kony's orders and not acting of their own volition.<sup>22</sup> Even Dominic Ongwen, a high-level LRA commander recently tried for war crimes by the International Criminal Court, stated in his trial that he did not have to ask those he has hurt for forgiveness because he had not intended to hurt them and was only following orders.<sup>23</sup>

Additionally, many former members have indicated that although they no longer align with Kony's cause, they do not feel as though they belong with their previous communities either and now consider themselves individuals without a home. When talking about her escape experience, Stella, a Ugandan woman who spent eight years as wife to an LRA commander before fleeing in 2019 said, "I felt like a stranger, like an outsider. I had no one to talk to . . . I had no family left."<sup>24</sup> Stella's comments reflect similar feelings expressed by other LRA defectors. In video interviews with journalists and other individuals, most interviewees referred to their previous communities as well as LRA leaders with terms such as "they" or "those people" rather than "we" or "us," even when discussing events in which they were also a participant—indicating that they do not align themselves with either group.<sup>25</sup>

This new identity as refugees has even been reinforced by Joseph Kony. A former LRA member interviewed at the time of their departure from the group claimed that in the last large address given by Joseph Kony to LRA forces, he stated that his "LRA children" were now on their own and were to live as refugees while following the path of God.<sup>26</sup> This directive built on preexisting feelings of displacement and encouraged some group members to live apart from local communities and attack NGOs or nearby citizens for food and other re-

sources rather than accept those offered by their home villages.<sup>27</sup> Data from Invisible Children—which records incidences of LRA-associated attacks—show that although the number of abductions, mutilations, and killings has steadily decreased during the past three years, the number of lootings has remained high. The same data show that more than 80 percent of all attacks perpetrated by LRA drifters or unidentified armed groups suspected to be former LRA members have included a looting element, signaling that these individuals are acting out of survival instincts rather than a desire to obtain recruits or further the cause of the LRA.<sup>28</sup>

Because of these factors, attacks perpetrated against NGOs and villagers can be partially attributable to defectors' self-assigned identity as refugees. This line of motivation provides an opening for NGOs to decrease the frequency and destruction of attacks by communicating to disaffected LRA members, potentially through printed flyers or radio campaigns, that the resources and services they offer are available to help LRA "refugees" in addition to local villagers, and that resources can be obtained without resorting to violent measures.

### **Fear of Resentment Blocks Reintegration**

In addition to dramatically dissociating forcibly recruited LRA soldiers from their previous identity, LRA leadership has attempted to drive a wedge between recruits and the outside world by forcing them to brutally attack village members. These actions have influenced the perceptual lens of low-level members by fostering a strong sense of perceived resentment from local communities. The LRA was notorious for forcing its low-level soldiers to mutilate local villagers by cutting off their lips, nose, and ears. Returning members have expressed that the violent acts or biting remarks made by villagers during these encounters initially deterred them from rejoining the community due to fear of retaliation.<sup>29</sup> After completing a qualitative study involving interviews conducted with both child soldiers and former commanders, trauma psychologist Angela Veale asserted that this practice instilled fear in both the victims and the unwilling perpetrators.<sup>30</sup> Several former LRA members shared that they were not willing to ask their victims for forgiveness because they believed the victims would likely attack them in retaliation if they approached them.<sup>31</sup> LRA leaders repeatedly told forcibly recruited militia members that their families would kill them if they returned home because the atrocities they had committed were unforgivable.<sup>32</sup> This manipulation as well as previous violent encounters with local community members have led potential returnees to believe that their return will not be well received by their former communities. In several cases, female former LRA members shared that they were forced to rejoin local communities ahead of their husbands to ensure that it was safe to return—indicating that a significant number of defecting LRA members fear retaliatory action.<sup>33</sup>

LRA members are also discouraged from reintegrating with local communities due to anticipated cultural differences. Many worry that they will not fit in with their former community after spending so much time apart. Former

rebel brides who have escaped from the LRA with their children have shared that they did not feel they would fit in with their patriarchal childhood communities because their children do not have a socially accepted father or family name.<sup>34</sup> These worries stem from a range of factors including economic and social concerns. Several reintegrated LRA members have shared that they were initially wary of returning to the community because they did not know how they would fit into the community or find a job because they had not completed their education and did not have any occupational skills.<sup>35</sup>

A number of returned LRA members have faced persecution and stigmatization after returning to their communities. Many of these individuals have shared in interviews that they have never felt fully accepted after returning from the militia and were initially referred to by their neighbors as “killers” or were socially ostracized.<sup>36</sup> Evelyn Amony, former wife to Joseph Kony and mother to three of his children, has described her initial experience as a reintegrated member of the community as extremely difficult: “My children are not welcome in my village. Community members say to me: ‘Our children were abducted by the LRA. They were killed by the LRA. And now you bring LRA children here—Kony’s kids here and we have to take care of his kids when he killed our own.’ They do not understand.” Her statements mirror much of what has been said by other women who have returned with their children.<sup>37</sup>

Several communities have even forced returning members to undergo ritual cleansings to dispel the demons of the people they had killed or murdered as part of the LRA.<sup>38</sup> According to the Grassroots Reconciliation Group, an NGO focused on reintegration efforts, many individuals who experienced these rituals described them as emotionally painful, humiliating, or demoralizing and consider the practice a sign that their return was not welcomed by the community.<sup>39</sup> In some cases, escapees have rejoined their home communities only to return to the LRA or an LRA faction after experiencing persecution. Other defecting members have shared that when these individuals returned to the brigade, their stories were retold—and probably exaggerated on—in large group meetings to dissuade others from leaving the militia.<sup>40</sup> These accounts have exacerbated preexisting fears associated with returning to local communities and deterred reintegration.

Although the worries associated with returning to LRA communities stem partially from true accounts and genuine reactions of community members, the majority of individuals who have reintegrated with their communities had positive experiences and express gratitude for their improved circumstances. Through quotes and stories shared by reintegrated members and collected by NGOs such as the Grassroots Reconciliation Group, many reintegrated members express contentment with the roles they now hold in their community and an appreciation for the individuals who helped them rejoin normal life.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, a returnee named Alice shared the following: “I belong to a community who talks to me and respects me. [The community] has relieved me from stress and helped me to put clothes on my baby’s back and food in my baby’s



mouth.” In the same interview series, others shared that although they initially felt judged by their community, they came to feel loved and accepted by those around them.<sup>42</sup>

Because disaffected LRA members are choosing to remain isolated from society in part because they view local community members as unwelcoming and resentful, they may be more likely to reintegrate into their pre-LRA communities if an invitation to return is extended by a former LRA member who can share a positive reintegration story and convey the willingness of fellow community members to warmly receive returnees. If NGOs partner with well-adjusted defectors to establish programs such as peer support groups or radio message campaigns voiced by reintegrated members as part of their efforts to reintegrate LRA defectors into society, the attacks on NGO outposts could decrease and vital resources could be protected and more efficiently distributed.

### **Lingering Spiritual Values and Norms Represent a Bridge to Reintegration**

Additionally, former LRA members who have yet to rejoin society have remained highly religious and are more likely to halt their attacks against villagers and NGOs and reintegrate with local communities if the invitation to return is extended by spiritual leaders. During their time as soldiers with the LRA, mid-to-low-level members were indoctrinated with the spiritual ideology of LRA leader Joseph Kony and forced to fight for his crusade. Even after deserting the terrorist group, many of these individuals demonstrate that they still value spirituality and respect a spiritually centered social structure.

After abducting recruits, LRA commanders used a combination of spiritual rituals and religious reeducation to control group members and justify their actions. Former members of the LRA shared that they were forced to participate in important spiritual ceremonies, such as baptism, under fear of being beaten or killed.<sup>43</sup> These rituals were supported by weekly religious education classes and the frequent use of spiritual metaphor and scripture in daily conversation and instruction.<sup>44</sup> Before leaving for battle, LRA members were instructed by leaders to coat their chests in shea butter as divine protection in combat. If the shea butter did not protect them from bullets, they were told that this was a result of exercising insufficient faith during the ritual.<sup>45</sup> This ritual is just one example of many used to influence soldiers throughout daily life in an LRA camp. Because the majority of militia members were forcibly recruited into the group at a young age, the spiritually centered lifestyle they experienced with the LRA was highly influential and may be the only one they fully remember.

This indoctrination expanded on or replaced the cultures that existed in the local communities the soldiers were abducted from, leaving them with a code of behavior strongly influenced by religious practices. While living with the LRA, members were frequently told by group leaders that resources, health, and laughter were provided as a result of their faith.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, if an individual was wounded or killed in battle, it was considered a punishment for weak faith.

Former LRA members have expressed that they still believe this to be true.<sup>47</sup> In video interviews, former LRA members expressed that they felt a holy spirit with them during their time with the rebel group and that even though they no longer approve of Kony's agenda, they continue to center their lives around the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Christianity.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, individuals who have separated themselves from Joseph Kony demonstrate that they maintain a strong belief in the divine. For example, several NGOs that operate halfway houses for returning LRA members have noted that occupants still make references to spiritual beliefs and LRA rituals.<sup>49</sup>

The spiritual values and norms of the LRA were reinforced by a spiritually structured society. To cement his leadership status and control group members, Joseph Kony established a spiritual hierarchy, declared himself a prophet, and claimed that LRA actions were directed by the spirits who possessed him. Former LRA members recall that when instructing followers, Kony claimed to be channeling one of the 13 different spirits that possessed him, each of which filled him with different spiritual, military, or strategic wisdom.<sup>50</sup> Although this leadership tactic may not have inspired lasting commitment from mid-to-low-level members, it did instill a strong belief in the divine. Several defectors shared that although they do not wish to fight in Kony's crusade, they do believe that he is led by powerful spirits who selected him for leadership.<sup>51</sup> Kony solidified this spiritual hierarchy by advancing soldiers to leadership positions as a result of perceived spiritual devotion, leaving members with an understanding that social status is a direct result of an individual's spirituality. In an interview, several LRA commanders asserted that the spirits had selected them for their leadership roles because of their faith. Other members were told that they had not been promoted because they did not have enough faith in the spirits that led their prophet.<sup>52</sup> This spiritual hierarchy left a strong impression on many group members. Although not all returned LRA members attend local worship services, many have shared that they view the local pastors and other spiritual leaders as individuals deserving great respect, indicating that they still consider leadership and social status to be closely linked to spirituality.<sup>53</sup>

Because defecting LRA "refugees" still value spirituality, hold on to religious practices, and respect spiritual leaders, they may return to local communities if an invitation is extended from any spiritual leader who can convey that the community also values spirituality and can reassure them that they will be able to continue leading a spiritually centered life once they rejoin the community. If NGOs partner with local spiritual leaders to extend these invitations, they may be able to persuade LRA drifters to rejoin community life and drastically decrease the number of attacks perpetrated against NGO bases and village members.

### **Mitigation of Attacks Will Require a Shift in Approach**

The cultural biases of mid-to-low-level defecting LRA members provide three

clear openings for the prevention of attacks on NGO outposts and villages and the successful reintegration of former LRA members.

1. Convey to defecting LRA members that they are eligible for NGO aid
2. Partner with reintegrated former LRA members to convey the willingness of local communities to welcome home defecting LRA soldiers
3. Partner with local spiritual leaders to extend reintegration invitations

Although there are a number of groups, such as military or government actors, that could pursue these opportunities, NGOs are best suited in this case for several reasons. Most importantly, NGOs are the most likely to successfully form positive relationships with LRA members, who are unlikely to trust military or government personnel due to the antigovernment rhetoric, which abounds among group leaders. Additionally, most NGOs operating in Central Africa, even those who have had to close or modify programs as a result of violence, employ or partner with local community members who can better connect with and enlist the help of reintegrated LRA members and spiritual leaders. Logistically, there is also a strong argument for NGOs to spearhead this effort. Because NGOs are the organizations that will be distributing aid to these individuals if the endeavor is successful, having them coordinate this effort will eliminate the need for a middleman and enable them to develop strong relationships with both the community members and former LRA members that they serve. Finally, these organizations have already been managing reintegration and attack-prevention efforts and are highly motivated to continue these efforts and improve on them to protect their resources and personnel currently under attack.

Through the dismissal, partial acceptance, or full acceptance of these opportunities, three potential scenarios are likely to emerge. First, if these opportunities are ignored and there is no shift in the current methods used to prevent LRA-associated attacks and encourage the reintegration of former members into local communities, NGOs are unlikely to experience any decrease in violent lootings and may even experience a surge in attacks, which will result in the loss of valued resources and an inability to elevate the welfare of impoverished communities in Central Africa. Second, if NGOs on their own shift their approach to account for LRA cultural biases, they could potentially prevent these attacks from occurring. However, NGOs are likely to achieve the strongest and longest-lasting results in the third scenario by partnering with local leaders and reintegrated members to encourage not only an acceptance of NGO aid and cessation of attacks but the reintegration of former LRA members into local communities.

### **Scenario #1: No Action**

If NGOs and their partners do not adjust their attack-prevention and community-reintegration efforts to account for LRA members' identity as refugees and fears of resentment and retribution, survival-motivated attacks are likely to remain constant or increase over time—leading to the continued loss of limited NGO resources and the growth of obstacles for the effective distribution of much-needed humanitarian aid.

The current attack-prevention methods have not proved significantly successful. NGOs continue to suffer violent, LRA-associated looting despite implementing early warning systems provided through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Invisible Children—indicating that the current methods of attack prevention are insufficient.<sup>54</sup> Qualitative, cultural data demonstrates that defecting LRA members fear retribution for previous offenses if they return to their former communities. If reintegration efforts do not attempt to assuage this fear, it will continue to push LRA defectors to the outskirts of local communities—solidifying both their identity as refugees and their justification for survival-motivated attacks on NGO outposts and villagers.

### **Scenario #2: Action by NGOs Alone**

If a partial shift in approach is adopted or a full shift is executed without meaningful cooperation from local community members, NGOs are likely to experience a decrease in defector-perpetrated attacks but are unlikely to see an increase in successful community reintegration rates. This scenario is likely to occur if NGOs can successfully convey that they are interested in helping returning LRA members but are unable to assuage fears of community-perpetrated retribution. A decrease in survival-motivated attacks on NGO outposts is likely to be preceded by an increased receipt among the NGO community of inquiries into available services and aid. Further signs that LRA defectors are interested in peacefully accepting NGO aid could include increased enrollment in NGO-led occupational workshops, participation in peer support groups, or applications for available micro loans.

Additional indicators that this scenario is evolving may include the establishment of new communities composed of former LRA members and their wives and children. An early sign of the development of such communities may be the selection of a group leader. Due to this group's lingering spiritual values and norms, this leader is likely to be a highly spiritual individual and may be entrusted with the responsibility of negotiating on behalf of the group. Additional signs that these communities are being established could include the construction of permanent or semipermanent dwellings, the introduction of early agricultural practices such as preparing fields for crops, and the development of trade-based practices such as sewing clothes or collecting wild produce to sell or exchange with other communities.

### **Scenario #3: Action by NGOs with Cooperation from Local Communities**

If NGOs are successful in both conveying their willingness to support LRA defectors in their refugee state and coordinating their efforts with local spiritual leaders and well-adjusted, reintegrated LRA members to assuage fears of resentment and retribution, the region is likely to experience a significant decrease in survival-motivated attacks and an increase in the rate of successful and lasting reintegration of former LRA soldiers.

This scenario will probably manifest through increased involvement of reintegrated LRA members in the social, economic, and spiritual aspects of their communities. As former LRA members transition out of their refugee identity and feel as though they belong in the local communities as well as experience a shift in their perceptual lens and no longer view community members as resentful or retaliatory, they would be more likely to engage with other members of the community in social situations. This may manifest in actions such as asking individuals whom they have harmed for forgiveness, relationships between single LRA members and non-LRA community members, or a variety of improvements in other social interactions. Because of their strong, lingering religious values, increased involvement in the spiritual aspects of the community is also a probable manifestation of successful reintegration. Early indicators of increased engagement may include attending spiritual services, appealing to religious leaders for repentance or counseling, and willingly participating in ritual cleansing ceremonies.

Successfully leveraging the cultural biases of LRA-associated attackers is likely to result in a sustainable decrease in violent lootings perpetrated against NGO outposts and a significant increase in reintegration rates, leading to the long-term preservation and advancement of NGO humanitarian efforts. By partnering with local leaders and reintegrated defectors to account for the self-appointed refugee status, perceived resentment from local communities, and lingering spiritual values and norms of disaffected LRA members, NGOs will be better equipped to efficiently distribute much-needed humanitarian aid among the highest-need communities of Central Africa.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout the years, different governments and organizations have tried a variety of approaches to eradicate the LRA. Although some have shown moderate results, none have been truly successful. In the 1990s, the Ugandan government conducted counterinsurgency operations against the LRA, but the size and influence of Joseph Kony's group continued to grow. In 2008, the Uganda People's Defence Force, with cooperation from Congolese and Southern Sudanese authorities and significant monetary backing from the United States, operated a yearlong military operation known as Operation Lightning Thunder.<sup>55</sup> The effort failed and ultimately caused an increase in violent attacks and reprisals

against local communities. Several years later, President Barack H. Obama sent 100 special forces and intelligence officers to Central Africa with the purpose of locating and apprehending Joseph Kony, who is still at large today.<sup>56</sup> In addition to these military-focused efforts, diplomatic approaches have also been unsuccessfully implemented. In 2006, the International Criminal Court issued warrants for the group's top leaders—only one has been captured and faced trial.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, the Ugandan government engaged in peace talks with the LRA in 2006, which broke down in 2008 when Joseph Kony refused to sign a final agreement.<sup>58</sup>

These military and diplomatic efforts, which have absorbed massive amounts of resources and required a large number of personnel, have fruitlessly applied one-size-fits-all approaches and failed to account for the critical role that culture plays in the conflict. In contrast, simple, culture-based efforts such as “come home” messaging campaigns have helped disaffected LRA fighters rejoin their communities.<sup>59</sup> Expanding these cultural efforts using the recommendations outlined in this article can significantly increase their efficacy and curb the devastating impact of the LRA.

Even though these actions have the potential to end the LRA-led conflict in Central Africa, they are specific to that conflict and are not intended as guidelines for reintegration efforts across all groups. These recommendations result from an analysis of the unique norms, values, identity, and perceptual lens of the LRA and do not account for the culture of other militant groups. It would be inefficient and dangerous to blindly apply them as a whole to conflict resolution efforts involving other cultures or organizations.

For example, the cultural biases of mid-to-low level LRA members have been strongly influenced by the religious focus of the LRA organization and associated indoctrination practices. As a result of this, reintegration invitations from local religious leaders have the potential to drastically improve successful reintegration rates. However, members of other militant groups, even those with strong religious elements such as Boko Haram or al-Qaeda, are unlikely to hold the same levels of deep spiritual faith or respect for outside religious leaders and would not be as impacted by these invitations.

Similarly, Joseph Kony's directive that LRA soldiers live as refugees compounded preexisting feelings of displacement among group members and led many low-level members to consider themselves to be without a home. Because most individuals in other terrorist organizations have probably not received similar direction from group leaders, even individuals who were forcibly recruited into terrorist organizations as children or have suffered similar identity disruptions, are unlikely to value offers of NGO aid in the same manner that LRA members will.

Because many LRA members are also wary of returning to their pre-LRA communities due to perceived threats of retribution, a key recommendation of this article is for reintegration efforts to focus on conveying local community members' support for reintegration. This recommendation may seem as though

it can be applied across all conflicts. However, successful reintegration efforts must account for the culture and perceptions of the communities into which the individuals are reintegrating as well as the specific circumstances under which the group members left, or were extracted, from the community and the interactions that have taken place between the two groups.

Although the recommendations provided in this article are specific to the LRA, they highlight the value of understanding the cultural intricacies of any terrorist organization before hastily and ineffectually applying a standard diplomatic or military approach. For conflict-resolution and reintegration efforts to be truly successful, they must address the unique cultural biases that shape group member behavior. Instead of vainly attempting to forcefully end a brutal conflict, these tailored culture-based approaches have the potential to persuade combatants to abandon the fight and end the conflict themselves.

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