Exile, Insurgency, and Regional Insecurity: The Political Evolution of the FDLR and its role in DRC-Rwanda Relations.

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ABSTRACT

The Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) remain one of the most enduring and consequential armed groups in the Great Lakes region. Originating from the remnants of the former Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR), Interahamwe militias, and political elites responsible for the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, the group evolved through successive organizational transformations from militarized refugee-camp structures to the Abacengezi insurgency, the Alliance for the Liberation of Rwanda (ALIR), and ultimately the FDLR. This article traces the political evolution of the FDLR between 1994 and 2025 and examines its role in shaping relations between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda. Drawing on spoiler theory, armed-group transformation literature, and regional security complex theory, the article argues that the FDLR's durability is best understood as a product of organizational adaptation, ideological continuity, and regional geopolitical dynamics. While military defeats repeatedly forced the group to reconfigure its structures and strategies, its core objective of opposing and destabilizing the post-genocide Rwandan state remained largely unchanged. Over time, the FDLR became embedded within eastern Congo's conflict economy, cultivated alliances with local armed groups and elements of the Congolese security apparatus, and became an integral component of broader patterns of proxy warfare and regional insecurity in the Great Lakes region. The article contends that the FDLR has evolved beyond a residual non-state armed group into a durable regional spoiler whose continued existence perpetuates mistrust, obstructs security cooperation, and reinforces cycles of conflict among Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and, increasingly, Burundi. Understanding the historical trajectory of the FDLR is therefore essential for explaining both the persistence of insecurity in eastern DRC and the continuing difficulties of building a stable regional peace order.

Keywords: FDLR; Armed-Group Transformation; Spoiler Theory; DRC-Rwanda Relations; Great Lakes Region; Regional Security; Insurgency; Proxy Warfare.

INTRODUCTION

More than three decades after the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, relations between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) remain profoundly influenced by armed groups operating in eastern Congo. Despite successive peace agreements, military interventions, and regional mediation efforts, eastern DRC continues to experience recurring violence involving both state and non-state actors. Among these groups, the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) occupies a particularly significant position because of its origins in the remnants of the former Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR), Interahamwe militias, and political elites that fled Rwanda following the genocide (Prunier, 2009; Nibishaka, 2025). The FDLR has remained a central factor in DRC-Rwanda relations. For Rwanda, the organization represents an enduring security threat because of its historical links to the perpetrators of the genocide and its continued opposition to the post-genocide political order. For the DRC, however, its position has often been more ambiguous. Although Congolese authorities have formally committed themselves to the disarmament of foreign armed groups, elements within the political and military establishment have at various times viewed the FDLR as a counterweight to Rwanda-backed insurgencies in eastern Congo (Stearns, 2012; United Nations, 2024). As a result, the movement has functioned simultaneously as a security challenge, a diplomatic liability, and a component of broader regional proxy conflicts. The persistence of the FDLR raises an important analytical question: how has an organization that emerged from the military defeat of the genocidal regime in 1994 survived repeated military offensives, disarmament initiatives, leadership losses, and shifting

regional political environments? Existing scholarship has generated important insights into the Genocide against the Tutsi, the Congo wars, and the political economy of violence in eastern Congo (Prunier, 2009; Autesserre, 2010; Stearns, 2012; Nibishaka, 2025). While some studies have examined the FDLR as a security threat or as one of many armed groups operating in eastern DRC (Stearns, 2010; United Nations, 2024), comparatively little attention has been devoted to explaining its long-term organizational evolution and the mechanisms that enabled its survival and continued political relevance. This article addresses that gap by tracing the evolution of the movement from the aftermath of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi to its contemporary role in regional security politics. It examines the transition from militarized refugee-camp structures in eastern Zaire, through the Abacengezi insurgency and the Alliance pour la Libération du Rwanda (ALIR), to the institutionalization of the FDLR and its subsequent entrenchment in eastern Congo. Rather than treating the FDLR simply as a residual armed group, the article analyzes it as a regional spoiler whose adaptation has shaped security dynamics between Rwanda and the DRC.

The analysis draws on extensive qualitative evidence collected from actors directly involved in or affected by the conflict, including former FDLR combatants, FDLR representatives based abroad, Congolese government officials, diplomats engaged in regional peace initiatives, and United Nations personnel with direct knowledge of armed-group dynamics in the Great Lakes region. The study also draws on the author's contemporaneous diary and field notes documenting atrocities committed during the insurgency in northern Rwanda between 1996 and the early 2000s. These materials are complemented by United Nations reports, policy documents, and academic literature, providing insights into both the internal evolution of the movement and the perspectives of key regional actors. The article argues that the FDLR's longevity is best explained by a process of continuous organizational adaptation operating within a favorable regional security environment. Although military defeats, leadership decapitation, defections, and repatriation repeatedly weakened the organization, important ideological, political, and strategic continuities persisted. Over time, the movement embedded itself within eastern Congo's conflict economy, developed relationships with local armed groups and elements of the Congolese security apparatus, and became integrated into wider patterns of regional proxy warfare. The study draws on spoiler theory (Stedman, 1997), the literature on armed-group transformation (Weinstein, 2007; Mampilly, 2011), and Regional Security Complex Theory (Buzan & Wæver, 2003) to explain how the FDLR survived successive crises and remained embedded within regional security dynamics. The remainder of the article is organized into six sections. The next section outlines the conceptual framework. Subsequent sections examine the militarization of exile after 1994, the emergence of the Abacengezi insurgency, the formation of ALIR, and the institutionalization of the FDLR. The final sections analyze the movement's integration into regional conflict dynamics and its evolution into a persistent spoiler in DRC-Rwanda relations.

Conceptual Framework: Armed-Group Transformation, Spoiler Theory, and Regional Security Dynamics

Understanding the evolution of the FDLR requires an analytical framework that goes beyond conventional studies of insurgency or post-conflict violence. The movement's persistence cannot be adequately explained by military factors alone, nor can it be understood solely through the legacy of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. Rather, the FDLR's trajectory reflects a combination of armed groups adaptation, strategic behavior, and regional geopolitical conditions. To explain this evolution, the article draws on three complementary perspectives: armed-group transformation, spoiler theory, and regional security complex theory.

Armed-Group Transformation

Armed groups rarely remain static over time. Military defeat, changing political opportunities, leadership losses, and shifts in their operational environment frequently compel insurgent organizations to adapt their structures, strategies, and sources of legitimacy. The literature on armed-group transformation emphasizes how non-state armed actors evolve in response to external pressures while seeking to ensure organizational survival (Weinstein, 2007; Mampilly, 2011). Weinstein (2007) argues that the organizational characteristics of rebel movements are shaped by the resources available to them and the environments in which they operate. Similarly, Mampilly (2011) demonstrates that insurgent organizations often develop new forms of governance, legitimacy, and authority as they seek to sustain themselves over prolonged periods of conflict. These insights are particularly relevant to the FDLR, whose history is marked by repeated organizational transformations. Following the defeat of the genocidal regime in 1994, former FAR and Interahamwe structures reorganized within refugee camps in eastern Zaire. Subsequent military setbacks led to the emergence of the Abacengezi

insurgency, the formation of ALIR, and eventually the institutionalization of the FDLR. Each phase reflected strategic adaptation rather than organizational collapse. This article conceptualizes the FDLR as a transformed rather than a residual armed movement. Its evolution demonstrates how military defeat can generate organizational innovation and adaptation rather than disappearance. While the movement's structures, tactics, and alliances changed over time, core political objectives and ideological narratives displayed significant continuity.

Spoiler Theory

While armed-group transformation helps explain how the FDLR survived over time, spoiler theory provides a useful framework for understanding its impact on regional peace and security processes. According to Stedman (1997), spoilers are actors who perceive peace agreements and conflict-resolution initiatives as threats to their power, interests, or ideological objectives and therefore seek to undermine them. Stedman distinguishes between limited, greedy, and total spoilers according to the nature of their goals and their willingness to compromise. Whereas limited spoilers may negotiate specific guarantees and concessions, total spoilers pursue objectives that are fundamentally incompatible with negotiated settlements and often reject agreements that do not fulfil their core political ambitions.

The FDLR exhibits many characteristics associated with a total spoiler. Since its emergence from the remnants of the former FAR and Interahamwe, the movement has consistently challenged the legitimacy of the post-genocide Rwandan state and has repeatedly rejected or obstructed initiatives aimed at disarmament, demobilization, and repatriation (United Nations, 2024). Although segments of the organization have at times engaged in dialogue and some members have voluntarily repatriated, the movement's leadership has generally maintained political objectives that extend beyond security guarantees to include demands related to power sharing, political participation, or broader political transformation in Rwanda (International Crisis Group, 2005). These positions have often limited the effectiveness of peace initiatives designed to facilitate the group's peaceful reintegration. Viewing the FDLR through the lens of spoiler theory highlights its broader political significance beyond that of a conventional non-state armed group. The concept helps explain how the organization has continued to influence regional peace and security dynamics despite its declining military capabilities. As discussed in subsequent sections, the persistence of the FDLR has shaped interstate relations, negatively affected peacebuilding initiatives, and contributed to enduring insecurity in the Great Lakes region.

Regional Security Complex Theory

Neither armed-group transformation nor spoiler theory alone can fully explain why the FDLR has remained relevant for more than three decades. Its persistence must also be situated within the broader regional security environment of the Great Lakes. Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003) provides a useful framework for understanding these dynamics. RSCT argues that states located within the same geographic region often become linked through patterns of security interdependence. As a result, the security concerns of one state cannot be understood independently of developments in neighboring states. In the Great Lakes region, the insecurities of Rwanda, the DRC, Uganda, and Burundi have become deeply interconnected through cross-border insurgencies, refugee flows, and proxy warfare (Ouma, 2023). The FDLR emerged and evolved within this regional security complex. The weakness of the Congolese state, the regional consequences of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, and competing security agendas among neighboring states created conditions that enabled the movement's survival (Ouma, 2023; Nibishaka, 2025). At the same time, the organization's continued presence contributed to the regionalization of conflict by linking domestic security concerns in Rwanda to political and military developments in eastern Congo. Consequently, the FDLR cannot be understood solely as a Congolese or Rwandan problem; it is a product of broader regional security interactions that transcend national boundaries.

Analytical Framework

Taken together, these three perspectives provide the foundation for the analysis that follows. Armed-group transformation explains how the FDLR adapted organizationally following military defeats and political pressures. Spoiler theory explains why the movement has consistently challenged initiatives aimed at resolving regional conflicts and improving DRC-Rwanda relations. Regional security complex theory situates the organi-

zation within the wider geopolitical environment that enabled its survival and reproduction. Combining these approaches allows the article to move beyond interpretations that portray the FDLR simply as a remnant of the perpetrators of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. Instead, the movement is understood as an evolving negative political-military actor whose organizational transformation, spoiler behavior, and regional embeddedness have enabled it to remain a significant factor in Great Lakes security politics.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative historical case-study design to examine the political evolution of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) and its role in shaping relations between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) between 1994 and 2025. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for investigating complex political, organizational, and security processes that unfold over extended periods and are shaped by historical contingencies, actor perceptions, and contextual dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The study employs process tracing and historical analysis to reconstruct the transformation of the movement across successive organizational phases. Process tracing is particularly useful for identifying causal mechanisms and understanding how specific events, decisions, and adaptations contributed to the survival and transformation of the organization over time (Beach & Pedersen, 2019; George & Bennett, 2005). The research is guided by an interpretivist orientation that seeks to understand how political and military actors perceived evolving opportunities, threats, and regional security dynamics. This approach allows for an examination not only of observable organizational changes but also of the meanings and strategic calculations that informed those transformations (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

Data Collection

The study draws upon multiple sources of qualitative evidence. The primary dataset consists of seventy-three (73) semi-structured interviews conducted with individuals possessing direct knowledge of the FDLR and broader regional security dynamics in the Great Lakes region. Interviews were conducted over multiple phases of fieldwork between May 2025 and July 2026 in Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, South Africa and through virtual platforms with respondents located in Europe and North America. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter and the potential security implications for some respondents, precise interview locations and identifying details are not disclosed. Respondents included current and former FDLR and ALIR members, FDLR representatives based abroad, Congolese government officials, regional security practitioners, diplomats involved in peace initiatives, and United Nations personnel familiar with armed-group dynamics in eastern DRC. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow for consistency across respondents while providing sufficient flexibility to explore individual experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of events (Bryman, 2016; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This approach was particularly valuable given the complexity and sensitivity of the research topic. Primary interview data were supplemented by the author's contemporaneous field notes, diary records, and a database documenting attacks against civilians, atrocities, and other security incidents in northwestern Rwanda during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Although these materials were not originally collected for the purposes of the present research, they constitute a unique body of primary evidence covering patterns of violence associated with the Abacengezi insurgency. The database contains a substantially larger number of documented incidents than can be accommodated within a single journal article. Consequently, incidents referenced in the analysis are illustrative rather than exhaustive and are used to reconstruct broader patterns of violence evident across the dataset. The study also relies extensively on documentary sources which include United Nations Security Council reports, United Nations Group of Experts reports on the Democratic Republic of Congo, MONUC and MONUSCO documentation, reports produced by human rights and humanitarian organizations, government publications, regional peace agreements, policy documents, and archival materials. These sources were complemented by a substantial body of scholarly literature on insurgencies, armed-group transformation, the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, the Congo wars, regional security, and rebel governance. Using multiple sources of evidence strengthens the robustness of historical case-study research and improves analytical validity through corroboration across different forms of data (Yin, 2018; Bowen, 2009).

Sampling Strategy

The study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to identify respondents possessing direct experience or specialized knowledge relevant to the research questions (Patton, 2015). Initial participants were selected because of their involvement in armed organizations, peace initiatives, regional security institutions, or government structures connected to the conflict. Subsequently, snowball sampling was used to identify additional respondents through referrals from existing participants. This method is widely employed in studies involving hard-to-reach populations such as former combatants, insurgent actors, and individuals involved in conflict environments (Noy, 2008). Given the sensitivity of the topic and the difficulties associated with accessing participants directly involved in armed movements, snowball sampling proved particularly valuable. Access to former and current FDLR and ALIR members was negotiated through a combination of professional networks, former combatants who had undergone demobilization and reintegration processes, and referrals provided by initial respondents. Building trust was essential given the political sensitivities surrounding the movement and concerns among former combatants regarding security, potential stigma, and confidentiality. The objective was not statistical representativeness but the acquisition of information-rich cases capable of illuminating processes of organizational transformation, leadership adaptation, regional security interaction, and conflict dynamics (Patton, 2015).

Data Analysis

The study utilizes thematic analysis and process tracing to analyse the collected data. Interview transcripts, field notes, documentary sources, and archival materials were coded according to recurring themes related to organizational adaptation, leadership continuity, military restructuring, violence against civilians, rebel governance, regional alliances, armed-group fragmentation, and interstate security relations. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and recurring narratives across diverse sources of evidence (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Coding proceeded both deductively and inductively. Deductive codes were derived from the study's theoretical framework, particularly concepts associated with armed-group transformation, spoiler behaviour, and regional security dynamics. Inductive coding allowed new themes to emerge directly from the evidence. To enhance analytical reliability, evidence derived from interviews was systematically compared with documentary material, United Nations reports, archival sources, and contemporaneous field notes. Findings were retained where multiple sources converged or where discrepancies themselves provided analytically significant insights. This process of source triangulation strengthened the credibility of interpretations and reduced reliance on any single category of evidence.

Ethical Considerations

Research on armed conflict, insurgent organizations, and political violence raises significant ethical concerns. The study was therefore conducted in accordance with established principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the protection of participants from potential harm (Israel & Hay, 2006). Respondents were informed about the objectives of the research and were free to decline participation or withdraw at any stage. Where disclosure could expose participants to reputational, professional, or security risks, identifying information was removed or anonymized. Particular caution was exercised when documenting allegations of violence, human rights abuse, or politically sensitive activities. The study also required reflexive consideration of the researcher's relationship to the subject matter. The author's interest in the subject stems partly from direct observation of the Abacengezi insurgency and its impact on civilian populations in northwestern Rwanda during the late 1990s and early 2000s. The author systematically documented incidents of violence against civilians, creating a contemporaneous database of atrocities, attacks, and other conflict related incidents. This long-term engagement provided contextual understanding of the conflict and informed aspects of the historical reconstruction presented in this article. At the same time, the analysis extends well beyond the period of direct observation and relies on a broader evidentiary base that includes interviews, documentary sources, United Nations reports, archival records, and scholarly literature. The interpretation of evidence was therefore informed by systematic triangulation across multiple independent sources.

Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, access to active or former members of armed organizations remains constrained by political sensitivities, security concerns, and practical limitations. Second, retrospective

interview data may be affected by memory bias, selective recall, and efforts by participants to justify past actions (Portelli, 1997). Third, some documentary sources may reflect institutional or political biases associated with governments, international organizations, humanitarian agencies, or advocacy groups. Finally, the clandestine nature of insurgent organizations means that aspects of internal decision-making and organizational dynamics are not always observable. To mitigate these limitations, the study relies on extensive source triangulation and combines interviews with contemporaneous field observations, documentary evidence, and secondary literature. While no individual source provides a complete account of the FDLR's evolution, the integration of multiple forms of evidence enhances the credibility and robustness of the findings.

THE POLITICAL EVOLUTION OF THE FDLR AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Origins of the FDLR: Militarized Exile and the Reorganization of the ex-FAR (1994–1996)

The origins of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) can be traced to the political and military reorganization that followed the defeat of the genocidal regime in July 1994. While the FDLR would not be formally established until the early 2000s, its organizational foundations emerged in the refugee camps established in eastern Zaire following the military victory of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). During this period, former military officers, political leaders, and militia commanders transformed what initially appeared to be a humanitarian crisis into a process of military reconstruction and political mobilization. The refugee camps became the institutional incubators from which later insurgent organizations, including the Abacengezi, ALIR, and ultimately the FDLR would emerge.

The Post-Genocide Exodus and the Militarization of Refugee Camps

The collapse of the interim government in Rwanda and the defeat of the Forces Armées Rwandaises (FAR) in July 1994 triggered one of the largest refugee movements in post-Cold War Africa. Between July and August 1994, approximately two million Rwandans fled to neighboring countries, including Zaire, Tanzania, Burundi, and Uganda (Prunier, 2009; UNHCR, 2000). The largest concentration of refugees settled in North and South Kivu, where camps such as Mugunga, Katale, Kibumba, Kahindo, Lac Vert, Kashusha, Panzi, and Inera hosted hundreds of thousands of displaced persons. Embedded within these refugee populations were substantial numbers of former FAR soldiers, Interahamwe militia members, local government officials, and political leaders associated with the defeated regime (Prunier, 2009; Adelman & Suhrke, 1999). Rather than disintegrating, these actors quickly re-established structures of authority within the camps. Humanitarian agencies often lacked the capacity or the will to separate civilian refugees from armed elements, allowing former military and political elites to dominate camp administration, influence aid distribution, and maintain control over refugee populations (Adelman & Suhrke, 1999). The refugee camps thus became spaces of dual authority. While international agencies viewed them as humanitarian sites requiring protection and assistance, former regime actors treated them as strategic rear bases for political and military reorganization. Refugees were frequently discouraged from repatriating, while narratives portraying post-genocide Rwanda as unsafe were actively propagated through political meetings, religious networks, and informal communication channels (UN Security Council, 1995; Terry, 2002). Consequently, exile became not a process of demobilization but one of institutional reconstruction, laying the foundations for the insurgent movements that would later emerge in eastern Zaire and eventually evolve into ALIR and the FDLR.

Reconstitution of the ex-FAR Military Apparatus

Contrary to expectations that military defeat and forced displacement would produce institutional collapse, the former *Forces Armées Rwandaises* (FAR) reconstructed a substantial politico-military apparatus within the refugee camps of eastern Zaire. Former military officers, political leaders, and militia organizers recreated many of the administrative and command arrangements that had existed before 1994, transforming refugee camps into centres of political mobilization, military reorganization, recruitment, and ideological consolidation (United Nations Security Council, 1996; Prunier, 2009). These structures later provided the organizational foundations from which the Abacengezi insurgency, ALIR, and ultimately the FDLR emerged.

At the political level, leaders of the former regime maintained elements of a government-in-exile. Former President Théodore Sindikubwabo retained a security apparatus commanded by Major Désiré Mageza and

assisted by Lieutenant Emmanuel Habimana, while former Prime Minister Jean Kambanda maintained a separate security detail under Captain Pierre-Célestin Bikweno. These arrangements reflected efforts by former regime elites to preserve authority over refugee populations and sustain the prospect of an eventual return to political influence in Rwanda (United Nations Security Council, 1996; Terry, 2002). Exile was therefore viewed not as the termination of a political project but as a temporary phase requiring organizational preservation and reconstitution. Military reorganization proceeded in parallel. The former army and national gendarmerie were merged into a unified command structure headed by a Ministry of Defence in exile under Colonel A. Gasake. Supporting him were Lieutenant Colonel Aloys Baranyeretse, responsible for administrative and legal affairs, and Colonel Théoneste Bagosora, responsible for political affairs and foreign relations before his arrest in 1996. Operational command of the reorganized force was entrusted to General Augustin Bizimungu, assisted by Brigadier General Gratien Kabiligi. The General Staff retained the conventional structure of personnel and administration (G1), intelligence (G2), operations (G3), and logistics (G4), with Colonel Joseph Murasampongo directing G1, Lieutenant Colonel Juvénal Bahufite heading intelligence, Lieutenant Colonel Antoine Sebahire overseeing operations, and Lieutenant Colonel Augustin Rwamanywa responsible for logistics. Supporting them were officers such as Major Venant Hategikimana, Major Joseph Nzabonimpa, Major André Bizimana, Major Emmanuel Neretse, and Major Aloys Twambaze, who supervised intelligence and liaison networks extending into East Africa and Europe.

The refugee camps also hosted two major territorial military commands centred on Bukavu and Goma. The Bukavu Military Division, under Brigadier General Gratien Kabiligi, included three operational brigades, a reserve brigade responsible for recruitment and training, a reception and processing centre at Panzi, a medical service commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Dr. Froduald Mugemanyi, and a training facility at Bulonge under Lieutenant Colonel Edouard Gasarabwe. The division itself was commanded by Colonel Aloys Nuviragije and Lieutenant Colonel Jean-Marie Vianney Ndahimana, supported by officers such as Colonel Jean-Bosco Ruhorahoza and Major Gilbert Kinyoni. Brigade commands were entrusted to figures who would later reappear in insurgent structures, including Lieutenant Colonel Edouard Gasarabwe, Major François Nzuwonemeye, Major Bernard Ntuyahaga, and Lieutenant Colonel Phénéas Munyarugarama. Each brigade was organized into battalions under established chains of command, reflecting efforts to preserve military hierarchy and organizational discipline despite displacement. The Goma Military Division was organized along similar lines. Commanded by Colonel Tharcisse Renzaho and assisted by Lieutenant Colonel Léonard Nkundiye, it consisted of five operational brigades and a reserve brigade. The division maintained departments responsible for intelligence, counterintelligence, operations, logistics, communications, political affairs, foreign relations, and legal affairs. Key personnel included Major Théophile Gakara, Lieutenant Colonel André Hakizimana, Major Ildéphonse Mugiraneza, Lieutenant Colonel Anastase Bizimuremyi, Major Pierre-Célestin Haguma, Colonel Venant Musonera, Colonel André Kayumba, Major Emmanuel Neretse, and Lieutenant Colonel Ephrem Setako. Medical services were directed by Lieutenant Colonel Dr. Laurent Baransaritse. The division also maintained specialized battalions responsible for infiltration operations into Rwanda, indicating that preparations were increasingly oriented towards future military action rather than mere organizational preservation. Military education remained an important component of these reconstruction efforts. A Higher Military School directed by Major Alexis Rwabukwisi continued officer training, while recruitment and processing centres at Panzi and Bulonge integrated former soldiers and new recruits into the reorganized structure. Internal reports emphasized intelligence gathering, maintenance of command discipline, preservation of morale, concealment of weapons stocks, and preparation for future operations (United Nations Security Council, 1996). At the same time, communication centres established in Harare, Pretoria, Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town, Manzini, Nairobi, Brussels, Brazzaville, Libreville, Yaoundé, Paris, and other locations linked military commanders to political representatives and diaspora networks, facilitating fundraising, recruitment, intelligence gathering, and political coordination. Particularly significant for the later emergence of the FDLR was the preservation of leadership cadres. Many of the officers occupying key positions within the camp structures subsequently became central figures in the Abacengezi insurgency and ALIR. Among them were Froduald Mugemanyi, Léonard Nkundiye, Paul Rwarakabije, Pierre-Célestin Haguma, Apollinaire Hakizimana, Antoine Sebahire, and Augustin Rwamanywa. Following the destruction of the camps during the First Congo War in 1996, a core group of these officers regrouped in eastern Congo and reconstructed a new command structure headed by Mugemanyi as Commander-in-Chief. He was assisted by Major Laurent Rwakaginga (G1), Major Apollinaire Hakizimana (G2), Colonel Paul Rwarakabije (G3), Lieutenant Colonel Léonard Nkundiye (G4), and Major Gaston Iyamuremye (G5). The reappearance of many

of the same individuals within successive organizational forms suggests substantial continuity between the refugee-camp structures, the Abacengezi insurgency, ALIR, and eventually the FDLR.

Military reconstruction was closely linked to a broader political and ideological project. Former military and political leaders actively discouraged refugee repatriation, portraying return to Rwanda as unsafe while presenting armed struggle as the principal avenue for political change (Adelman & Suhrke, 1999; Terry, 2002). Narratives emphasizing Hutu victimhood, political exclusion, and the illegitimacy of the post-genocide government circulated widely throughout the camps and later reappeared in the discourse of the Abacengezi, ALIR, and the FDLR. Refugee populations therefore served not only as sources of recruits and logistical support but also as constituencies through which organizational identities, political narratives, and mobilization networks were preserved over time.

Viewed through the lens of armed-group transformation, the refugee camps functioned as sites of institutional continuity. The preservation of leadership cadres, command structures, intelligence networks, recruitment systems, transnational communication channels, and ideological narratives enabled former FAR elites to adapt to military defeat while maintaining an organized political and military project. The Abacengezi insurgency, ALIR, and eventually the FDLR therefore emerged not as entirely new organizations but as successive adaptations of structures first reconstructed in the refugee camps of eastern Zaire between 1994 and 1996. By 1995 and 1996, reports of recruitment, military training, infiltration planning, and cross-border incursions had heightened security concerns in Kigali. Rwandan authorities increasingly viewed the camps as insurgent rear bases rather than humanitarian settlements. The militarization of exile had therefore transformed a refugee crisis into a regional security problem and became a major factor shaping Rwanda's support for military operations that culminated in the First Congo War. In this sense, the camps constituted the geographical and organizational bridge between the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, the Congo wars, and the armed movements that would dominate regional security dynamics for decades (Prunier, 2009; Nibishaka, 2025).

Political Reorganization, Ideological Continuity, and Refugee Mobilization

Military reconstruction was accompanied by efforts to preserve political cohesion among displaced populations. Former political elites associated with the regime established organizations designed to maintain influence over refugees and articulate a political agenda in exile. Among the most important of these was the *Rassemblement pour le Retour des Réfugiés et la Démocratie au Rwanda* (RDR), which emerged as a political platform claiming to advocate for the interests of refugees while simultaneously providing political cover for military reorganization. The RDR and related networks developed extensive links across refugee communities and the emerging diaspora (Mamdani, 2001). Communication centers and political representatives operated in cities such as Nairobi, Harare, Johannesburg, Pretoria, Brussels, and other locations with significant Rwandan exile populations. These networks facilitated recruitment, fundraising, propaganda dissemination, and political lobbying, thereby extending the reach of exiled structures well beyond eastern Zaire (Muggah & Whitman, 2013; Turner, 2007).

At the ideological level, as it was in the military, former regime leaders also promoted narratives emphasizing Hutu victimhood, political exclusion, and the illegitimacy of the RPF government (Mamdani, 2001; Hintjens, 1999). Refugees were frequently told that repatriation would expose them to persecution or death, while armed struggle was presented as the only viable means of securing political change in Rwanda. Interviews conducted with former FDLR members suggest that these narratives played an important role in sustaining recruitment and preserving organizational cohesion during the period of exile. This ideological continuity proved critical for the later evolution of the movement. Although organizational forms changed over time, many of the political narratives developed in the camps reappeared in the discourse of the Abacengezi insurgency, ALIR, and eventually the FDLR (Rafti, 2004; Turner, 2007).

The refugee population represented more than a constituency to be protected; it became a strategic resource for the exiled leadership in line with refugee-warrior communities theory (Zolberg, Suhrke, & Aguayo, 1989). Control over large refugee populations provided political legitimacy, manpower, financial resources, and a degree of protection from external intervention. Former military and political leaders frequently used coercion, intimidation, and propaganda to discourage voluntary repatriation, fearing that returns would undermine both their influence and their recruitment base. Numerous accounts from humanitarian organizations documented cases in which refugees who attempted to return to Rwanda faced threats, violence, or accusations of

collaboration with the RPA (Adelman & Suhrke, 1999). The concentration of civilians around military structures also created a form of political leverage. Any military action targeting armed elements risked causing significant civilian casualties, thereby constraining the responses available to both regional governments and international actors. This dynamic generated what became one of the central contradictions of the post-genocide refugee crisis. Humanitarian assistance intended to alleviate civilian suffering also helped sustain the social and logistical infrastructure upon which military reorganization depended (Terry, 2002; Prunier, 2009). The result was a prolonged period during which former FAR networks enjoyed both protection and access to resources necessary for organizational survival.

From Exile to Insurgency: The Rise of the Abacengezi and the Emergence of ALIR (1996–1998)

The destruction of the refugee camps in eastern Zaire during the First Congo War can be seen as a decisive defeat for the former Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) and Interahamwe militias in their quest for a return to power in Rwanda through armed struggle. However, while the camp system that had sustained military reconstruction between 1994 and 1996 was dismantled, the networks, leadership structures, and ideological foundations established in exile survived. Rather than ending armed resistance against the post-genocide Rwandan state, the destruction of the camps transformed the character of that resistance. Former FAR structures abandoned conventional military organization and adapted to decentralized insurgency, giving rise to the Abacengezi rebellion and subsequently the Alliance pour la Libération du Rwanda (ALIR). This period represents a critical stage in the genealogy of the FDLR because the destruction of the refugee camps did not eliminate the organizational networks established after 1994. Instead, it compelled former FAR and Interahamwe structures to abandon conventional military organization and reorganize around a decentralized insurgent strategy embodied in the Abacengezi rebellion.

The Collapse of the Refugee-Camp System

By 1996, the refugee camps in North and South Kivu had become a major source of regional instability. As cited above, the camps hosted not only hundreds of thousands of refugees but also thousands of former soldiers and Interahamwe militia members who had reorganized politically and militarily since their defeat in 1994 (Prunier, 2009). Reports by the United Nations documented continuing recruitment activities, weapons circulation, military training, and cross-border incursions into Rwanda (United Nations, 1996). For the Rwandan government, the camps had evolved into rear operational bases for insurgent activities. Kigali increasingly argued that the presence of armed former regime elements in eastern Zaire posed an existential threat to Rwanda's post-genocide reconstruction. These concerns coincided with broader regional tensions involving the Mobutu regime, Banyamulenge communities in South Kivu, and emerging opposition groups seeking to overthrow President Mobutu Sese Seko (Nibishaka, 2025; Stearns, 2011). In October 1996, Rwanda and Uganda supported the Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo (AFDL), led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila, in a military campaign against both the refugee camps and the Mobutu government. The offensive rapidly overwhelmed camp defenses. Major camps including Kibumba, Katale, Kahindo, Mugunga, Lac Vert, Kashusha, Panzi, and Inera were dismantled within weeks. Hundreds of thousands of refugees returned to Rwanda, while others fled westward into the Congolese interior (Prunier, 2009; Stearns, 2011). The destruction of the camps represented a profound disruption to the organizational infrastructure established after 1994. Military headquarters, logistical depots, communication centers, and recruitment facilities were lost. Nevertheless, much of the leadership survived. Senior officers including General Augustin Bizimungu, Brigadier General Gratien Kabiligi, Colonel Dr. Mugemanyi Froduald, Colonel Paul Rwarakabije, and numerous mid-level commanders escaped into the forests of eastern Congo together with thousands of combatants. Interviews conducted with former combatants indicate that commanders quickly framed the loss of the camps not as a decisive defeat but as the beginning of a new phase of struggle. Orders were reportedly issued instructing dispersed units to maintain chains of command, regroup in designated areas, and prepare for a transition to guerrilla warfare. This response reflected a broader organizational culture that viewed exile as temporary and military recovery as inevitable. The dispersal of forces across the Congolese interior also altered the strategic environment in which former FAR structures operated. Whereas the camps had provided centralized territorial control, the new conditions favored mobility, decentralization, and flexible command arrangements. Adaptation therefore became a matter of organizational survival.

The Transition from Conventional Warfare to Guerrilla Insurgency

The destruction of the camps forced former FAR officers to confront a strategic reality fundamentally different from the one that had existed between 1994 and 1996. The structures of a conventional army could no longer be sustained. Large formations were vulnerable to attack, supply lines were disrupted, and access to heavy weaponry diminished significantly (Prunier, 2009). As a result, insurgent leaders adopted a strategy centered on infiltration, mobility, and asymmetric warfare. The movement that emerged from this transformation became commonly known as the Abacengezi, meaning "infiltrators" in Kinyarwanda. The name itself reflected the new operational doctrine. Instead of engaging in conventional military confrontation, insurgents sought to infiltrate Rwandan territory through mountainous terrain, forests, and porous border zones before conducting attacks against military and civilian targets (Prunier, 2009; Stearns, 2011). Former fighters interviewed for this study consistently described this shift as a deliberate strategic adaptation. According to several respondents, commanders instructed combatants to abandon expectations of conventional military victory and instead focus on exhausting government forces through persistent insecurity. Small units were expected to operate independently, survive with minimal logistical support, and rely extensively on local intelligence networks. The geographic focus of this insurgency was northwestern Rwanda, particularly the former prefectures of Ruhengeri and Gisenyi. These regions were considered strategically important because of their rugged terrain and historical association with the Habyarimana regime. Insurgent leaders believed that local grievances, refugee linkages, and existing social networks would facilitate recruitment and support. By late 1997, infiltration operations had intensified. Mobile armed groups crossed repeatedly from eastern Congo into Rwanda, establishing temporary bases, conducting reconnaissance missions, recruiting supporters, and launching attacks against civilian and military targets. While the insurgency never acquired the capacity to threaten the survival of the Rwandan state, it succeeded in creating significant insecurity in the northern part of the country.

Leadership, Command and Organizational Continuity

One of the most important factors explaining the persistence of the Abacengezi insurgency was the preservation of leadership networks and command structures inherited from the former Forces Armées Rwandaises (FAR). Although the destruction of the refugee camps in eastern Zaire in 1996 eliminated the territorial and logistical bases upon which the ex-FAR had reconstructed themselves after the genocide, it did not dismantle the military hierarchy itself. Instead, senior officers adapted to the new environment by reorganizing command arrangements, decentralizing operational responsibilities, and maintaining communication networks across eastern Congo and the wider diaspora (Stearns, 2011; Weinstein, 2007). Consequently, the transition from camp-based military structures to insurgent warfare represented an organizational transformation rather than an institutional rupture. The preservation of leadership continuity was particularly significant because it enabled the insurgency to survive the disruption caused by military defeat and geographic dispersal. Following the destruction of the camps, a core group of senior ex-FAR officers reconstituted a streamlined command structure in eastern Congo. Operational leadership was entrusted to Froduald Mugemanyi as Commander-in-Chief, assisted by Major Laurent Rwakaginga (G1), Major Apollinaire Hakizimana (G2), Paul Rwarakabije (G3), Léonard Nkundiye (G4), and Major Gaston Iyamuremye (G5). This structure reproduced the organizational logic of the former FAR by maintaining departments responsible for administration, intelligence, operations, logistics, and political affairs despite the loss of a conventional military environment.

The retention of specialized command functions demonstrates a broader pattern of organizational continuity. Rather than relying solely on charismatic leadership or informal networks, the movement preserved bureaucratic mechanisms for decision-making, intelligence collection, military planning, and logistical coordination (Weinstein, 2007; Staniland, 2014). Such arrangements allowed insurgent commanders to manage dispersed military units operating across multiple sectors while maintaining strategic coherence. The existence of clearly defined command responsibilities also facilitated the transmission of military expertise from former FAR officers to younger recruits entering the movement after 1996 (Mampilly, 2011; Stearns, 2011). Operational command increasingly depended on a combination of centralized strategic leadership and decentralized field-level execution. Senior commanders retained responsibility for planning, recruitment, logistics, and overall military strategy, while day-to-day operations were delegated to regional commanders and infiltration teams. Several former FAR officers played particularly important roles in directing infiltration

activities into Rwanda. Among the most influential were Pierre Célestin Haguma, Innocent Ndayambaje (known as Kazungu), and officers operating under the noms de guerre Makofe, Cyaka, and Mabuye. These commanders coordinated reconnaissance missions, recruitment activities, intelligence collection, and attacks inside Rwanda during the peak of the insurgency. Their activities demonstrate that insurgent operations were not spontaneous local initiatives but formed part of a broader command framework inherited from earlier FAR military structures.

An equally important element of organizational continuity was the maintenance of transnational communication networks. Although military operations were concentrated in eastern Congo and northwestern Rwanda, movement leaders established communication centres in numerous countries across Africa and Europe, including South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Cameroon, Gabon, Congo-Brazzaville, Belgium, and France. These centres facilitated communication between military commanders, political representatives, and diaspora supporters while supporting intelligence gathering, fundraising, recruitment, and propaganda dissemination against the Government of Rwanda.

Sectorization as a Strategy of Insurgent Adaptation

Deprived of the centralized structures that had characterized camp-based military organization, insurgent leaders developed a sector-based operational system designed to facilitate decentralized warfare while preserving strategic coordination. The sectorization of insurgent activities therefore represented one of the most important organizational adaptations undertaken by the movement during the Abacengezi phase. Rather than reflecting organizational weakness, the creation of operational sectors illustrates how former FAR commanders and Interahamwe militia leaders sought to preserve their organizational coherence under conditions of military pressure and territorial fragmentation.

The sector system divided northern and western Rwanda into distinct operational zones under designated commanders responsible for military operations, intelligence gathering, recruitment, political mobilization, reconnaissance, logistical support, and target selection. In 1997, six principal sectors were established. Sector Alpha covered the communes of Kinigi, Kidaho, Nkumba, Butaro, Bwisogo, Rurare, and Kinyami and was commanded by Captain Alexandre Shumbusho, assisted by Sébastien Ngorabaranga. Sector Bravo encompassed Mukingo, Nyakinama, Nyamutera, Ndusu, Nkuli, Gatonde, and parts of Rushashi under the command of Nzabonimpa, commonly known as Ruvaga. Sector Charlie, commanded by Captain Alfred Rusigi, covered Rubavu, Kanama, and Rwerere. Sector Delta included Karago, Giciye, Nyamyumba, Satinsyi, Kayove, Gaseke, Kibilira, and Ramba under Lieutenant Gélase Harelimana, known as Kaceri. A separate Cyangugu-Kibuye sector operated under Captain Pacifique Ntawuguka. This territorial organization served several strategic functions. First, it allowed insurgent leaders to overcome the logistical constraints created by the destruction of the refugee camps. Instead of relying on large military concentrations vulnerable to government offensives, insurgents could operate through smaller semi-autonomous units embedded within local environments. Second, the system facilitated the integration of military and political functions at the local level. Sector commanders were not merely battlefield leaders. They were responsible for identifying priority targets, conducting reconnaissance of operational zones, establishing intelligence networks, recruiting new combatants, organizing local supporters, and preparing future attacks. In effect, they exercised many of the functions traditionally associated with both military commanders and political organizers.

The sector system also illustrates the extent to which the insurgency sought to exploit existing social and geographic connections. Most operational zones were located in areas where commanders possessed prior social networks, local knowledge, or regional and ethnic ties. This facilitated recruitment, intelligence collection, and movement across difficult terrain. The heavy concentration of sectors in Gisenyi and Ruhengeri prefectures reflected the movement's assessment that northwestern Rwanda offered the most favourable environment for insurgent activity due to its proximity to eastern Congo, mountainous topography, and the historical political significance of the region under the previous Hutu regime. Importantly, sectorization enabled the insurgency to pursue a coordinated campaign of violence while avoiding excessive centralization. Attacks against schools, refugee camps, local authorities, churches, markets, and transportation networks occurred across multiple sectors but followed broadly similar patterns. This suggests that local commanders enjoyed operational flexibility while remaining integrated into a wider strategic framework. The recurrence of similar forms of violence across geographically distinct areas points to the existence of common operational objectives rather than isolated local initiatives. The sector structure therefore functioned as a mechanism for

combining local autonomy with broader strategic coherence. The adaptability of the sector system became evident following a series of military setbacks suffered by the insurgency in 1998. Government offensives, growing military pressure, and the deaths of several senior commanders significantly weakened the original sector arrangement. Rather than collapsing, however, the movement responded through further organizational adaptation. By mid-1998, the existing sectors were restructured into four larger operational zones associated with the emerging Alliance pour la Libération du Rwanda (ALIR). Nazareth incorporated the entirety of Ruhengeri Prefecture together with Rushashi, while Bethlehem covered Kanama, Rubavu, Mutura, and Rwerere under the continued leadership of Captain Alfred Rusigi. Quebec included Karago, Giciye, and neighbouring areas, while Delta extended across Ngororero, Ramba, Gaseke, Kibilira, Kayove, and parts of Kibuye and Gitarama under Lieutenant Nizeyimana, known as Bigaruka. This reorganization was significant for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that military pressure did not produce immediate disintegration. Instead, insurgent leaders responded by redesigning command arrangements to reflect changing operational realities. Second, the transition from the original sector system to the ALIR structure reveals substantial continuity between the Abacengezi and subsequent organizational forms. Leadership cadres, operational methods, recruitment networks, and territorial strategies remained largely intact despite institutional restructuring. What changed was the scale and configuration of command rather than the underlying organizational architecture.

Violence Against Civilians and the Logic of Intimidation

The Abacengezi insurgency was characterized by the systematic use of violence against civilians and civilian institutions. Following the destruction of the refugee camps in eastern Zaire in late 1996, insurgent forces increasingly abandoned attempts to challenge the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) through conventional military engagement. Faced with superior military capabilities and shrinking operational space, insurgent commanders turned to a strategy centered on terror, intimidation, selective assassination, forced recruitment, and attacks on civilian infrastructure. Violence was not merely a consequence of military confrontation but rather a deliberate political instrument designed to undermine state authority, obstruct post-genocide reconstruction, discourage refugee repatriation, and create conditions favorable to renewed mobilization.

A first dimension of this strategy involved attacks on institutions associated with national reconciliation and state reconstruction. Educational institutions were particularly vulnerable because they functioned as symbols of a new political order based on national unity rather than ethnic division. The attack on Nyange Secondary School on 18 March 1997 illustrates this dynamic. After entering the school compound, insurgents ordered students to separate themselves according to ethnic identity. When the students collectively refused, the attackers opened fire, killing dozens of pupils. A similar pattern was evident during the attack on Muramba Girls' Secondary School on the night of 27–28 April 1997, where insurgents killed the school principal, Sister Grati Bosmans, seventeen students, and several other civilians. Subsequent attacks on schools in Gatonde, Nkuli and Nyamyumba during 1998 indicate that educational institutions remained recurring targets throughout the insurgency. These attacks sought not only to inflict casualties but also to challenge the ideological foundations of post-genocide reconstruction and demonstrate the continued relevance of insurgent violence.

Religious institutions occupied a similarly important position within local communities and consequently became targets of insurgent violence. Churches, convents, and religious leaders frequently played central roles in education, humanitarian assistance, conflict mediation, and community rebuilding. The attack on the convent of the Daughters of the Resurrection in Busasamana during the night of 7–8 January 1998, which left five nuns dead together with the convent caretaker and the spouse of a local Christian leader, represented one of the most serious assaults on religious personnel during the insurgency. Likewise, the killing in Ruhengeri diocese of Catholic priests Guy Pinard on 2 February 1997 and Boniface Kagabo during the weekend of 25–26 April 1998 reflected a broader effort to intimidate local institutions capable of strengthening social cohesion and state legitimacy. Attacks against both educational and religious institutions demonstrate that insurgent violence extended far beyond military targets and increasingly focused on weakening the social foundations of post-conflict recovery.

A second dimension of insurgent violence involved the systematic targeting of genocide survivors, refugees, and displaced populations. These groups occupied a particularly symbolic place within the post-genocide order and were frequently portrayed by insurgent networks as political constituencies aligned with the new government. The massacre of seven genocide survivors in Kigombe on 13 February 1997, the killing of fifteen

survivors at Gaheneze in Mutura Commune on 18 August 1997, and repeated attacks against repatriated refugees demonstrate the degree to which such populations became specific targets of insurgent violence. The attack on the Mudende refugee camp on the night of 22 August 1997, which resulted in the deaths of more than two hundred Congolese Tutsi refugees, represents one of the deadliest atrocities of the insurgency. Similar attacks followed against regroupment centres and transit camps at Nyarutovu, Kinigi, Kayove, and Nkamira during 1998. These attacks were not random acts of violence but reflected an effort to disrupt state-led repatriation and stabilization initiatives while simultaneously reinforcing fear among refugee and survivor communities. The assault on the displaced-persons camp at Kinigi on 29 April 1998 further demonstrates the multifunctional character of insurgent violence. During the attack, twenty civilians were killed and forty-two wounded, while livestock and supplies were looted, and twenty-nine detainees were released from a nearby prison. Rather than constituting a purely military operation, the attack combined intimidation of displaced populations, economic predation, and direct confrontation with local state institutions. Similar dynamics were evident elsewhere, where attacks frequently targeted both civilian concentrations and nearby administrative or security structures.

A third component of the insurgent strategy involved attacks on public infrastructure, markets, and transportation networks. Such attacks were intended to disrupt economic activity, undermine public confidence in government protection, and generate widespread insecurity. The attack on the Giciye market on 14 November 1997, subsequent killings at roadblocks established on the Ruhengeri-Gisenyi Road, and repeated ambushes targeting civilian vehicles illustrate this pattern. Among the most notorious incidents was the attack on a BRALIRWA company bus on 19 January 1998. After reportedly ordering passengers to identify themselves according to ethnic affiliation, the attackers opened fire, killing and injuring numerous civilians. Similar attacks against public transport occurred in Nyange, along the Kigali-Kibuye Road, and in several locations throughout Kigali-Rural Prefecture. Particularly significant was the attack on the "Pensez-Y" roadside centre near Tare on 12–13 July 1998, during which thirty-four civilians watching the 1998 Soccer World Cup were killed after the facility was set on fire. By targeting roads, buses, markets, and commercial centres, the insurgency sought to transform ordinary civilian movement and economic activity into sites of vulnerability and fear.

Equally significant was the insurgency's deliberate targeting of administrative authorities and international actors. Local officials represented the most visible symbols of state authority in rural communities and therefore became priority targets. The killings of Anne-Marie Mukandoli, mayor of Karengera Commune, and Judith Mukabaranga, mayor of Nyakabuye Commune, illustrate this pattern. Similarly, former Kinigi mayor Nkusi Jean Pierre and several other local leaders in Kinigi and Kigombe were targeted as part of a broader effort to weaken local governance structures. Attacks on administrative authorities were frequently accompanied by assaults on prisons and government offices. On 3 December 1997, approximately three hundred insurgents attacked the communal offices of Bulinga, killing civilians and security personnel before releasing all 630 prisoners detained in the local prison. Likewise, attacks in Cyanika and Kidaho during April 1998 formed part of wider efforts to destabilize local administration in strategic border areas.

The insurgency's hostility extended beyond Rwandan institutions to international humanitarian and human-rights actors. On 5 February 1997, infiltrators killed five members of the United Nations Human Rights Field Operation, including two international staff members and three Rwandan interpreters. Humanitarian workers were similarly targeted. Particularly notable were attacks against Spanish aid personnel associated with organizations such as Médecins du Monde operating in Ruhengeri. These incidents generated considerable international concern and demonstrated that the insurgency increasingly viewed international humanitarian engagement as part of the broader political and security architecture sustaining post-genocide reconstruction. Attacks against foreign aid workers, religious personnel, and UN staff suggest that insurgent violence was directed not only at immediate opponents but also at institutions capable of strengthening state legitimacy and international support for the new political order.

Taken together, these patterns demonstrate that violence constituted a central mechanism through which the Abacengezi attempted to compensate for declining military capabilities. Schools, churches, refugee camps, markets, buses, administrative institutions, humanitarian organizations, and local communities all became arenas through which insurgents sought to project power, spread fear, undermine reconstruction, and preserve political relevance. The geographical reach of these attacks across Gisenyi, Ruhengeri, Gitarama, Kibuye,

Kigali-Rural, and Cyangugu further underscores that civilian victimization was not incidental to the insurgency. Rather, it was a deliberate and systematic strategy intended to challenge the consolidation of the post-genocide state and sustain conditions of insecurity that could facilitate continued armed mobilization

Counterinsurgency, Organizational Crisis and the Emergence of ALIR

By 1998, sustained counterinsurgency operations had significantly weakened the Abacengezi insurgency. RPA military pressure disrupted infiltration routes, degraded operational networks, and reduced insurgent freedom of movement. Key commanders were killed, captured, or isolated, while improved intelligence capabilities and local defence initiatives constrained the movement's ability to establish durable support structures inside Rwanda. Former combatants interviewed for this study consistently identified this period as a strategic turning point in the conflict. These setbacks did not, however, produce organizational collapse. Instead, they triggered a process of adaptation and restructuring as insurgent leaders sought to preserve the movement under increasingly unfavorable conditions. They began reassessing both command arrangements and political strategy, laying the foundations for a more institutionalized politico-military organization, which culminated in the emergence of the Alliance pour la Libération du Rwanda (ALIR).

From ALIR to the FDLR: Institutionalization and Political Rebranding (1998–2003).

While the formation of ALIR represented an initial attempt to reorganize dispersed insurgent networks after the collapse of the refugee camps, the emergence of the FDLR reflected a deeper process of institutionalization, political rebranding, and regional adaptation. Between 1998 and 2003, the movement underwent significant organizational changes, transforming from a primarily insurgent force conducting infiltrations into Rwanda into a more durable politico-military organization embedded within the complex conflict environment of the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This transformation would prove essential to its long-term survival.

From the Abacengezi to ALIR: Organizational Adaptation and Political Repositioning

By 1998, the Abacengezi insurgency had reached a critical turning point. Although insurgent forces continued to operate across northwestern Rwanda and eastern Congo, their military position was becoming increasingly precarious. Sustained operations by the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), combined with the disruption of infiltration routes, the destruction of support networks, desertions and the elimination of key commanders, significantly reduced the movement's operational effectiveness. Rather than producing disintegration, sustained military pressure compelled insurgent leaders to redesign command arrangements, consolidate dispersed networks, and reorganize the movement under the ALIR framework. The emergence of ALIR therefore represented less the creation of a new movement than the institutional reconfiguration of an existing insurgent network seeking to survive under increasingly unfavorable conditions. The reorganization occurred against the backdrop of substantial military losses. Between 1997 and 1998, numerous commanders who had played important roles in coordinating infiltration operations were killed, captured, or isolated. Among the most significant losses was the death of Léonard Nkundiye, who was killed together with approximately two hundred fighters during military operations in Cyiya, Gisenyi Prefecture. Also killed was Froduald Mugemanyi, one of the most influential figures in the post-camp reorganization of the insurgency, who died during operations in Nyarutovu in August 1998. Other commanders lost during this period included Nzabonimpa, responsible for operations in Mutura, and Captain Alexandre Shumbusho, a former para-comma-

ndo officer who had coordinated insurgent activity in Byumba Prefecture. Numerous additional officers operating in Gisenyi, Ruhengeri, Cyangugu, Gikongoro, Kibuye, and Gitarama suffered similar fates as military pressure intensified.

These losses exposed the vulnerabilities of the insurgency's original organizational structure. The sector system established after the destruction of the refugee camps had proven effective in coordinating infiltration operations, but it became increasingly difficult to sustain under sustained military pressure. The original Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, and Cyangugu-Kibuye sectors were designed for an insurgency that expected to establish a more permanent presence inside Rwanda. By mid-1998, however, the movement faced shrinking operational space, declining mobility, and growing logistical constraints. Building on the sectorized command structure established during the Abacengezi insurgency, ALIR consolidated existing operational zones into a more coherent organizational framework. Rather than creating entirely new structures, the reorganization

streamlined command arrangements, improved coordination among dispersed units, and preserved the decentralized operational model that had emerged following the destruction of the refugee camps. This restructuring reflected a broader process of institutional adaptation in which existing military networks were retained while the movement sought to strengthen its political organization and long-term survival prospects

The emergence of ALIR also reflected the growing importance of political organization. By the late 1990s, insurgent leaders increasingly recognized that military operations alone were unlikely to achieve their objectives. Under these conditions, political representatives abroad assumed a more prominent role in maintaining links between dispersed insurgent structures, refugee communities, and external supporters. The increasing reliance on these transnational networks signaled an important shift from a predominantly military insurgency toward a more organized politico-military movement, laying the foundations for the institutional restructuring that culminated in the creation of the FDLR. These networks facilitated the circulation of information, fundraising, recruitment, intelligence collection, and political coordination across multiple countries. The political dimension of ALIR was also shaped by broader debates within refugee communities. Former military officers, political activists, and refugee leaders sought to develop a more coherent narrative capable of attracting support beyond the narrow constituency of former FAR personnel. While the movement continued to advocate armed resistance, greater attention was devoted to themes of refugee return, political exclusion, and opposition to the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)-led government. This evolution did not fundamentally transform the movement's objectives, but it reflected growing recognition that long-term survival required political as well as military organization. Much of ALIR's leadership was drawn from the former Forces Armées Rwandaises (FAR) and from the military structures reconstructed in the refugee camps of eastern Zaire after 1994. Recruitment networks, command hierarchies, operational doctrines, and transnational communication systems established during exile continued to constitute the organizational backbone of the movement. Equally important, the movement's core political objective of challenging the post-genocide Rwandan government remained unchanged. The persistence of attacks against civilians, local authorities, educational and religious institutions, genocide survivors, and repatriated refugees demonstrates that organizational restructuring was not accompanied by a corresponding ideological moderation or transformation of the movement's modus operandi. Rather, ALIR preserved both the ideological narratives and coercive practices that had characterized earlier phases of armed mobilization. Consistent with scholarship on armed-group transformation, the transition from the Abacengezi to ALIR is therefore best understood as a process of organizational adaptation rather than organizational replacement. As Weinstein (2007), Mampilly (2011), and Staniland (2014) argue, insurgent organizations frequently respond to military setbacks by reconfiguring command structures and redistributing authority while maintaining core leadership networks, political objectives, and repertoires of violence. ALIR exemplified this pattern. It functioned as a transitional organizational form that enabled former FAR networks to survive under changing political and military conditions, providing an institutional bridge between the camp-based military apparatus reconstructed after 1994, the Abacengezi insurgency that emerged after 1996, and the more formalized politico-military structure that would later become the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR).

The Second Congo War and New Opportunities for Survival

The outbreak of the Second Congo War in August 1998 fundamentally transformed the strategic environment within which ALIR operated. Prior to the conflict, the movement's primary focus had been the conduct of insurgent operations against the Rwandan government through infiltration campaigns launched from eastern Congo. Rwanda's military intervention in support of the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD) and its broader effort to overthrow the government of Laurent-Désiré Kabila altered regional alignments and created new opportunities for armed actors opposed to Kigali (Prunier, 2009). Faced with a major military challenge, the Congolese government increasingly viewed former FAR and ALIR combatants as valuable allies in a broader regional struggle against Rwandan and Ugandan influence. As a result, insurgent organizations that had previously operated primarily as anti-Rwandan guerrilla forces became progressively integrated into the military and political structures supporting the Congolese war efforts. This development marked a significant turning point in the evolution of the movement. Rather than remaining isolated insurgent networks operating from the margins of eastern Congo, ALIR became part of a much larger military coalition that included the Forces Armées Congolaises, later the FARDC, together with military contingents from Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia, and various Congolese militias opposed to the RCD and its Rwandan backers (Prunier, 2009; Stearns, 2012). The movement's integration into this coalition expanded both its strategic

relevance and its operational reach. Several ALIR leaders and former FAR officers relocated from the Kivu region to Kinshasa, where they established closer relationships with Congolese political and military authorities and participated in the coordination of military operations conducted within the broader anti-RCD alliance. This represented a significant departure from the earlier phase of the insurgency, during which operational planning had been oriented primarily toward cross-border attacks inside Rwanda.

Participation in the anti-RCD coalition provided important military advantages. The war offered ALIR and former FAR officers' access to logistical support, weapons, intelligence networks, and operational areas far beyond those available during the post-1996 insurgency. The vast territory controlled by the Congolese government and its regional allies afforded insurgent forces new space to regroup, recruit, and reorganize beyond the immediate reach of Rwandan military operations. Equally important, cooperation with state actors facilitated a degree of political protection and military legitimacy that the movement had lacked since the destruction of the refugee camps in 1996. The conflict also contributed significantly to the professionalization of the movement's military structures. Former combatants interviewed for this study reported that ALIR fighters benefited from military training programmes organized by allied forces during the war. Particularly significant were training activities conducted with the support of Zimbabwean military instructors in Katanga in 1999 (Meredith, 2006). These programmes reportedly exposed ALIR personnel to advanced military instruction, including conventional combat tactics, command and control procedures, intelligence gathering, communications, and operational planning. Such training enhanced the military capabilities of a movement that had previously relied largely on guerrilla warfare and decentralized infiltration tactics. The experience also facilitated interaction between ALIR commanders and conventional military officers from regional armies, contributing to the diffusion of military knowledge and operational practices across the coalition.

From the perspective of armed-group transformation theory, the Second Congo War generated conditions conducive to both organizational survival and institutional adaptation. Scholars have observed that insurgent organizations frequently exploit major regional conflicts to access resources, alliances, and opportunities for organizational development that would otherwise remain unavailable (Weinstein, 2007; Mampilly, 2011; Staniland, 2014). External conflicts can provide armed groups with strategic depth, new sources of legitimacy, and opportunities to embed themselves within wider political and military networks. ALIR benefited substantially from these dynamics. Military pressure inside Rwanda had increasingly constrained its insurgent campaign, yet the Congolese war allowed the movement to reposition itself within a broader regional coalition while preserving its core political objective of challenging the post-genocide Rwandan state. Importantly, this strategic repositioning did not imply any fundamental transformation of the movement's ideological orientation. While ALIR became increasingly integrated into Congolese military structures and regional alliances, its leadership continued to frame the struggle in terms of opposition to the Rwandan government and maintained the networks, narratives, and strategic aspirations inherited from the former FAR and the Abacengezi insurgency. The war therefore did not alter the movement's long-term objectives but provided new mechanisms through which those objectives could be pursued. In this sense, the Second Congo War represented far more than a geographical relocation of the insurgency from Rwanda to eastern Congo. It marked the beginning of a process through which ALIR evolved from a relatively isolated insurgent movement into a regionally embedded politico-military actor operating within broader systems of interstate conflict and regional security competition. The significance of this transformation became evident in the years that followed. By embedding itself within Congolese and regional military networks, gaining access to external support, and acquiring new operational capabilities, ALIR created conditions that facilitated its subsequent institutionalization and political rebranding. The war thus constituted a critical bridge between the Abacengezi insurgency and the formal emergence of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), which would inherit and further develop many of the political, military, and regional linkages established during this period.

The Formal Emergence of the FDLR

The formal creation of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) in 2000 represented the culmination of a broader process of organizational transformation that had begun with the militarized refugee structures established in eastern Zaire after 1994 and continued through the Abacengezi insurgency and the emergence of the ALIR. Rather than constituting an entirely new movement, the FDLR emerged through the integration of two previously distinct but interconnected components: ALIR's military structures operating

primarily in the DRC and a political leadership drawn largely from Rwandan exile and diaspora communities, particularly in Europe (Start, 2012). The creation of the FDLR reflected growing recognition among movement leaders that military action alone was unlikely to achieve their objectives and that long-term organizational survival required a more sophisticated political and institutional framework capable of operating both inside and outside the conflict zone (Rafti, 2004; Mampilly, 2011). At the center of this restructuring was the incorporation of ALIR as the military component of the new organization. The commanders, combatants, logistical networks, and operational structures that had sustained the insurgency against Rwanda remained largely intact and became the armed wing of the FDLR. This military branch was subsequently institutionalized as the *Forces Combattantes Abacunguzi* (FOCA), which would become the movement's principal military structure in eastern Congo. Senior former FAR officers retained command of the armed wing, with figures such as Paul Rwarakabije and Syvestre Mudacumura playing a prominent role in its leadership. FOCA thus represented a continuation rather than a replacement of ALIR's military apparatus, preserving command experience, recruitment mechanisms, operational doctrines, and battlefield networks developed during the insurgencies of the late 1990s.

Parallel to this military institutionalization was the emergence of a more structured political leadership. A group of former politicians, intellectuals, activists, and members of the Rwandan exile community operating primarily in Germany, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and other European countries sought to provide the movement with a broader political identity and greater international reach. The most prominent figures to emerge from this process were Ignace Murwanashyaka, Callixte Mbarushimana and Straton Musoni. Unlike military commanders operating in eastern Congo, Murwanashyaka and other diaspora leaders enjoyed greater freedom to engage in political lobbying, fundraising, media outreach, and diplomatic engagement. The establishment of the FDLR therefore created a dual organizational structure in which FOCA functioned as the military wing while a civilian political leadership based largely abroad assumed responsibility for external relations, political communication, and organizational representation.

The movement simultaneously embarked on a process of political rebranding. Official statements increasingly emphasized democratization, refugee rights, political inclusion, national reconciliation, and political dialogue. References to the restoration of the pre-1994 political order became less explicit, while movement leaders sought to portray the FDLR as a legitimate political opposition force seeking democratic change in Rwanda rather than simply a military successor to the former FAR. This reorientation reflected broader attempts to improve the organization's international standing, attract support among diaspora communities, and expand its political constituency beyond former combatants and refugee populations. Nevertheless, significant continuity persisted beneath the new organizational framework. The military structures inherited from ALIR remained intact within FOCA. Many political and military leaders maintained links to earlier exile organizations, and the movement's overarching objective of challenging the post-genocide Rwandan state remained fundamentally unchanged. Nor was the organizational transformation accompanied by a meaningful abandonment of violence as a political instrument. While the political leadership increasingly emphasized diplomacy and political engagement, armed structures in eastern Congo continued to regard military struggle as a legitimate means of pursuing political objectives. Consequently, the creation of the FDLR represented less a rupture with the past than a process of institutional consolidation through which military and political components were integrated within a single organizational framework.

Diaspora Networks and Political Mobilization

One of the most important developments associated with the emergence of the FDLR was the creation of transnational structures linking diaspora-based leaders in Europe with military networks operating in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Unlike the former FAR, the Abacengezi insurgency, and ALIR, which remained largely dominated by military actors within the Great Lakes region, the FDLR incorporated a significant external political component. Through these networks, the movement combined armed activity with fundraising, recruitment, political messaging, and international outreach. These activities were concentrated primarily within Rwandan exile communities in Germany, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and other European countries. Diaspora representatives played important roles in organizational coordination, fundraising, information dissemination, and political mobilization (Turner, 2007; Rafti, 2004). Under the leadership of Ignace Murwanashyaka, Straton Musoni, Callixte Mbarushimana, and other diaspora figures, the organization sought to portray itself as a political representative of Rwandan refugees and exiles while

maintaining close links with FOCA commanders in eastern Congo. In practice, external leadership became the public face of the movement, while military leaders directed operations on the ground.

The FDLR also engaged a range of external interlocutors, including religious organizations, peacebuilding initiatives, civil-society actors, and conflict-resolution practitioners. Particularly notable were contacts facilitated by the Catholic lay peace movement Comunità di Sant'Egidio, which provided channels of communication between FDLR representatives and international actors involved in regional peace efforts. Although such engagement did not confer political recognition, it offered the organization access to forums and networks that had largely been unavailable to its predecessors (Rafti, 2004; Lemarchand, 2009). Alongside these efforts, the movement developed support structures across several countries that enabled it to disseminate statements, organize meetings, mobilize resources, and engage sections of the diaspora on issues such as refugee repatriation, political reform, power sharing, and national reconciliation. These initiatives formed part of a broader attempt to present the organization as a political movement rather than solely an armed group operating from Congolese territory. Nevertheless, they did little to overcome persistent concerns regarding the FDLR's origins, its links to individuals associated with the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, its genocidal ideology, and its continued involvement in violence in both Rwanda and the DRC (Stearns, 2010; Lemarchand, 2009).

From an organizational perspective, these transnational structures contributed significantly to the FDLR's longevity. By dispersing political, financial, and logistical functions across multiple jurisdictions, the movement reduced its dependence on territorial control in eastern Congo and became less vulnerable to military setbacks and leadership losses. Interview evidence further suggests that diaspora actors increasingly influenced strategic debates, often advocating greater emphasis on political engagement and international outreach while recognizing the limited prospects of achieving organizational objectives through military means alone.

The FDLR and the Regionalization of Conflict: Entrenchment in Eastern Congo (2003–2026)

The formal end of the Second Congo War in 2003 did not result in the disappearance of the FDLR. Instead, the post-war period marked a significant reorientation in its trajectory as the movement shifted from a predominantly cross-border insurgency focused on Rwanda to an armed group deeply embedded in the political, economic, and security dynamics of eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). As prospects for achieving its objectives through conventional military confrontation diminished, the organization expanded its involvement in local conflict systems, developed alternative sources of financing, and cultivated relationships with local communities, armed actors, and elements of the Congolese state apparatus. These adaptations enabled it to withstand repeated military offensives, sanctions, leadership losses, and disarmament initiatives. Consequently, the FDLR's significance increasingly derived not from its capacity to challenge the Rwandan state directly, but from its enduring role in sustaining patterns of violence and instability within eastern DRC and the wider Great Lakes region.

The Post-War Environment and FDLR Survival

The 2003 Global and Inclusive Agreement formally ended the Second Congo War and established a transitional government in Kinshasa. Yet state authority remained weak across much of eastern Congo, particularly in North and South Kivu. Armed groups retained control over large rural areas, local administrations remained fragile, and security institutions lacked the capacity to establish effective territorial control (Autesserre, 2010; Nibishaka, 2025). These conditions provided fertile ground for the survival of the FDLR. Rather than being disarmed or dismantled during the peace process, the movement exploited governance vacuums to consolidate its presence in remote areas. Former combatants interviewed for this study frequently described the post-2003 environment as a period of relative stability for the organization, not because military operations ceased, but because the broader conflict environment enabled armed groups to coexist with limited state interference.

The movement established bases throughout North and South Kivu, particularly in Walikale, Masisi, Rutshuru, Lubero, Kalehe, Mwenga, Shabunda, and Fizi territories. Dense forests, mountainous terrain, weak infrastructure, and limited state presence provided favourable conditions for insurgent survival. These areas

enabled the FDLR to regroup, recruit, and reorganize while avoiding sustained confrontation with stronger military forces. According to several former FDLR members interviewed during this research, the organization gradually shifted from a strategy centred on returning to Rwanda through military force toward one focused on long-term organizational survival within eastern Congo. This adjustment did not signify the abandonment of its political objectives. Rather, it reflected the recognition that maintaining the movement's structures and networks had become a prerequisite for pursuing those objectives in the future.

The effectiveness of this strategy became increasingly evident during successive military campaigns launched against the movement. Beginning with joint Rwanda-DRC operations such as *Umoja Wetu* in 2009 and continuing through *Kimia II* (2009), *Amani Leo* (2010-2012), and later *Sukola II*, the FDLR faced sustained military pressure from FARDC, regional actors, and MONUSCO (Stearns, 2011; United Nations Group of Experts, 2009; International Crisis Group, 2010). These operations succeeded in disrupting command structures, destroying bases, recovering territory, encouraging defections, and repatriating thousands of combatants and dependents to Rwanda. However, they consistently fell short of their ultimate objective of dismantling the movement. Although military officials frequently reported significant gains against the FDLR particularly during *Kimia II* and *Amani Leo*, the organization repeatedly reconstructed itself in new areas following major offensives. They also benefited from local support networks, revenue derived from taxation and participation in mineral and agricultural economies, and the fragmented security environment that characterized the Kivus (Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers, 2009). In several areas, military operations displaced FDLR units without dismantling the political, economic, and social networks that sustained them. As scholars of insurgency have noted, armed groups that establish durable local linkages often prove more resilient than those relying exclusively on military force. The limitations of military solutions became increasingly apparent during *Amani Leo* and *Sukola II*. Although these operations reduced the FDLR's operational capacity and territorial influence, commanders frequently responded by dispersing into forested zones, integrating into local communities, fragmenting into smaller units, and exploiting gaps in state authority. MONUSCO itself acknowledged that operations against the FDLR increasingly focused not only on military defeat but also on preventing the group's re-establishment in recovered areas and protecting civilian populations from reprisals (MONUSCO, 2010). Consequently, repeated offensives weakened the FDLR but did not eliminate it. By the mid-2010s, the armed group's significance derived less from its military capacity to challenge Rwanda directly than from its continued role in local conflicts, illicit economies, and regional insecurity.

Economic Entrenchment and the Conflict Economy

A central factor explaining the FDLR's durability after 2003 was its integration into eastern Congo's conflict economy. Unlike the refugee camps that had previously provided logistical support, the FDLR increasingly relied on local economic activities to finance its operations. Numerous United Nations reports documented the movement's involvement in the exploitation of gold, cassiterite, coltan, wolframite, and other mineral resources across North and South Kivu (United Nations, 2004; United Nations, 2024). The organization established systems of taxation targeting miners, traders, transporters, and local populations living within areas under its influence. Rather than directly controlling all mining sites, FDLR units frequently extracted revenue by imposing taxes on production, transportation, and commercial activities taking place within territories where they exercised military influence. The group's presence was particularly significant in mining zones located in Walikale, Masisi, Lubero, Kalehe, Mwenga, Shabunda, and Fizi territories, where minerals formed part of broader regional trading networks connecting eastern Congo to markets in neighbouring countries and beyond (Nibishaka, 2013). In many cases, minerals originating in areas influenced by the FDLR entered commercial supply chains through local traders, négociants, transporters, and commercial intermediaries operating in major trading centres such as Goma, Bukavu, Butembo, Beni, and Uvira. From these centres, mineral production was frequently transferred through cross-border networks linking eastern DRC to regional export routes passing through neighboring countries before entering international markets (United Nations, 2010; United Nations, 2015; Nibishaka, 2025; Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers, 2009). Although the extent of direct FDLR control over these networks varied across time and location, access to mineral-rich territories provided an important source of income that helped sustain military and organizational activities.

The movement's economic activities extended well beyond the mining sector. FDLR units became involved in charcoal production, timber exploitation, agriculture, livestock trading, road taxation, and cross-border commerce. Particularly significant was their participation in the charcoal trade around Virunga National Park,

a lucrative activity that generated substantial revenue while contributing to environmental degradation and insecurity within protected areas (Nibishaka, 2013; Stearns, 2010). In some localities, commanders established parallel systems of taxation that affected virtually all forms of economic activity, including agricultural production, market trade, transportation, and access to natural resources. This diversification of revenue sources reduced dependence on external sponsors and increased the movement's ability to withstand military pressure. Former commanders interviewed for this study frequently emphasized that economic self-sufficiency had become an essential survival strategy following the collapse of earlier support structures and "*on and off* "assistance from state actors inside the DRC. Revenue derived from local economic activities enabled units to acquire food, medicine, equipment, and other supplies even during periods of intense military pressure and international sanctions. Importantly, these activities also transformed the relationship between the FDLR and local populations. Civilians were no longer viewed solely as potential recruits or supporters but increasingly became participants in economic systems shaped by the movement's presence.

Through taxation, labour obligations, protection arrangements, and commercial exchange, the FDLR became embedded within local economic networks. This embeddedness complicated subsequent disarmament and demobilization efforts because the movement's survival was no longer dependent exclusively on military structures but was increasingly tied to the broader political economy of eastern Congo. As a result, efforts to weaken the FDLR through military operations alone often proved insufficient (Nibishaka, 2017), since the financial and social networks sustaining the organization remained largely intact even when individual bases or commanders were removed or killed.

Governance, Coercion, and Local Integration

The FDLR's survival cannot be explained solely by military adaptation and economic self-sufficiency. Like

many long-lived insurgent organizations, it developed systems of governance that enabled it to regulate territory, extract resources, and manage relations with local populations. Research on rebel governance demonstrates that armed groups frequently establish alternative forms of authority designed to administer territory, resolve disputes, regulate economic activity, and mobilize local support (Mampilly, 2011). The FDLR exhibited many of these characteristics. In areas under its influence, commanders and local representatives often performed functions typically associated with state institutions, including conflict mediation, security provision, taxation, and regulation of access to land, natural resources, and commercial activities. Local populations consequently interacted with FDLR structures not only as combatants but also as de facto authorities exercising varying degrees of political and economic control. However, the movement's local influence rested not only on governance mechanisms but also on coercion. As the FDLR became increasingly entrenched in eastern Congo after 2000, violence evolved from a primarily cross-border insurgent strategy directed against Rwanda into a tool for territorial control, resource extraction, population management, and organizational survival. Violence thus became closely intertwined with governance. Through intimidation, forced recruitment, punishment of perceived collaborators, sexual violence, abductions, and attacks on civilians, the movement sought to enforce compliance, deter opposition, maintain internal discipline, and secure continued access to strategic resources and territories (Human Rights Watch, 2009; United Nations, 2024).

The relationship between local communities and the FDLR varied significantly across territories. Interviews with Congolese officials, civil-society actors, and local observers suggest that many communities viewed the organization primarily as a source of insecurity, predation, and displacement. In other areas, particularly among segments of certain Congolese Hutu communities, the movement benefited from ethnic, social, economic, or historical ties that facilitated coexistence. Such relationships did not necessarily imply ideological support for the organization. Rather, they often reflected pragmatic adaptations to local power realities in contexts where state institutions remained weak or absent. Over time, these interactions enabled the FDLR to become increasingly embedded within the broader social and political landscape of eastern Congo. Nevertheless, coercion remained central to this process of local integration. United Nations investigations, sanctions reports, and human rights organizations repeatedly linked the FDLR to killings, forced displacement, sexual violence, forced labour, child recruitment, village destruction, and attacks against civilian populations throughout North and South Kivu (United Nations, 2010; United Nations, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2009). Among the most prominent atrocities attributed to the movement was the 2009 Busurungi massacre in Walikale Territory, during which approximately ninety-six civilians were reportedly killed, some of them

burned alive in their homes (United Nations Security Council, 2010; United Nations, 2024). The attack demonstrated that despite declining conventional military capabilities, the organization retained the capacity to inflict large-scale violence against civilian populations. The movement was also implicated in systematic patterns of conflict-related sexual violence. Between 30 July and 2 August 2010, a coalition of FDLR combatants and Mai-Mai Cheka fighters attacked thirteen villages along the Kibua-Mpofi axis in Walikale Territory. A United Nations Joint Human Rights Office investigation determined that at least 387 civilians, including women, men, girls, and boys, were subjected to rape during the attacks. Hundreds of homes and businesses were looted, civilians were abducted, and many victims were forced into labour (UNJHRO, 2011; United Nations, 2024). The Walikale attacks became one of the most extensively documented episodes of conflict-related sexual violence in eastern Congo and illustrated the continued use of coercive violence as a means of asserting control over local populations.

Beyond Walikale, FDLR units were implicated in numerous attacks across North and South Kivu. Human Rights Watch and United Nations investigations documented violence in Kamananga, Lumenje, Chambucha, Masisi, and other localities, where civilians were killed, abducted, mutilated, or forcibly displaced (Human Rights Watch, 2009; United Nations, 2012). A United Nations investigation into attacks conducted between 31 December 2011 and 4 January 2012 confirmed the killing of at least thirty-three civilians, including women and children, some of whom were reportedly decapitated, burned alive, or executed at close range (United Nations, 2012). The movement also relied on forced labour and child recruitment. United Nations and human rights reports documented numerous cases involving minors employed in intelligence gathering, logistics, transportation, and combat-related roles (Human Rights Watch, 2009; United Nations, 2024). These practices reflected growing recruitment challenges as military losses, defections, and disarmament initiatives gradually reduced the organization's manpower base. Violence extended beyond civilian communities to conservation areas and economic infrastructure. According to the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation, fighters associated with FDLR-FOCA were responsible for the April 2020 attack in Virunga National Park that killed twelve park rangers and four civilians (ICCN, 2020; United Nations, 2024). Such attacks underscored the movement's continuing capacity to threaten both local populations and protected areas despite years of military pressure and organizational fragmentation.

Taken together, these patterns reveal the complex relationship between governance and coercion within the FDLR's system of territorial control. While the organization developed mechanisms for regulating economic activity, mediating disputes, and interacting with local communities, these structures were ultimately underpinned by the credible threat and frequent use of violence. The FDLR's longevity therefore derived not only from military adaptation and economic integration but also from its ability to combine localized forms of governance with coercive practices that enabled it to maintain authority in areas where state institutions remained weak. This combination of social embeddedness, economic control, and organized violence helped sustain the movement's presence in eastern Congo long after its capacity to challenge the Rwandan state directly had significantly diminished.

Relations with FARDC and Congolese Armed Groups

One of the most controversial aspects of the FDLR's post-2003 evolution concerns its relationship with the Congolese Armed Forces (FARDC) and other local armed groups. Although Kinshasa officially supported efforts to disarm foreign armed groups, multiple United Nations Group of Experts reports documented instances of cooperation between elements of FARDC and FDLR units (United Nations, 2008; United Nations, 2024). Such cooperation varied across time and location but frequently reflected converging security interests rather than formal political alignment. For Congolese military commanders confronting rival armed groups such as the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD), the Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple (CNDP), and later the March 23 Movement (M23), the FDLR often represented a useful source of manpower, intelligence, and local military knowledge. For the FDLR, cooperation with FARDC provided access to resources, operational opportunities, and a degree of protection from military isolation. The movement also cultivated alliances with various Mai-Mai factions and community-based militias. These relationships were typically pragmatic rather than ideological, reflecting common enemies and localized security calculations rather than shared political objectives. Nevertheless, such alliances enhanced the movement's ability to withstand military pressure and facilitated its integration into eastern Congo's complex conflict landscape. Former diplomats interviewed for this study consistently identified these relationships as a

major obstacle to disarmament efforts. As long as the FDLR continued to serve a strategic function for local actors, attempts to isolate and dismantle the organization faced significant constraints. Successive military campaigns frequently targeted the FDLR without addressing the wider security environment that incentivized cooperation between the movement and other armed actors.

The significance of these alliances became particularly evident following the resurgence of M23 after 2021. Confronted with renewed M23 offensives and persistent allegations of Rwandan support for the rebellion, the Congolese government increasingly relied on a diverse coalition consisting of FARDC units, local self-defence groups collectively known as the Wazalendo, regional military partners, and, according to numerous reports, FDLR elements operating alongside government-aligned forces. A recent study by the Congo Research Group and Ebuteli notes that Kinshasa's response to the M23 insurgency has involved extensive reliance on auxiliary armed actors, including Wazalendo groups, Burundian forces, and FDLR combatants (Verweijen et al., 2025).

Continuing Cross-Border Threats to Rwanda

Although the FDLR became increasingly concentrated in eastern Congo after the defeat of the northwestern insurgency, it never abandoned its long-standing objective of challenging the Rwandan state. While the large-scale incursions that characterized the Abacengezi rebellion of the late 1990s largely disappeared, the movement continued to pursue a strategy of low-intensity cross-border destabilization through intelligence gathering, recruitment, infiltration, cross-border reconnaissance, logistical support arrangements, and occasional armed attacks. FDLR combatants, regional security officials, and United Nations personnel interviewed for this study consistently emphasized that FDLR networks remained oriented toward Rwanda, maintaining clandestine structures designed to facilitate future operations and preserve the movement's influence beyond eastern Congo.

Rwandan authorities repeatedly reported the arrest of suspected FDLR operatives involved in intelligence activities, recruitment efforts, propaganda dissemination and support networks operating inside Rwanda. Although generally more limited than during the Abacengezi period, these activities demonstrated the organization's continuing strategic orientation toward Rwanda and its refusal to relinquish the objective of influencing political and security developments across the border. Periodic grenade attacks inside Rwanda round 2010s and other security incidents attributed to FDLR-linked networks reinforced these concerns. Although the scale of such incidents never approached that of the insurgency of the late 1990s, they contributed to the perception that the movement remained an active security threat despite its declining conventional military capabilities. The continued existence of intelligence cells, recruitment channels, and infiltration networks suggested that the organization retained the capacity to support or facilitate armed action inside Rwanda under favorable circumstances. The most significant example of this continuing threat occurred during the night of 4–5 October 2019, when FDLR assailants crossed from the Democratic Republic of Congo and attacked civilians in Kinigi Sector, Musanze District, near Volcanoes National Park. The attack initially killed eight civilians and wounded eighteen others, while subsequent security operations increased the death toll to fourteen. Several captured assailants reportedly identified themselves as members of the FDLR, and Rwandan authorities linked the operation to FDLR-affiliated armed elements operating from eastern Congo. The Kinigi attack was particularly significant because it demonstrated that, despite years of military pressure, defections, leadership losses, and organizational fragmentation, networks associated with the FDLR retained the ability to conduct lethal operations inside Rwanda. Subsequent investigations linked the attack to actors associated with RUD-Urunana, a splinter movement that emerged from the broader FDLR milieu (Al Jazeera, 2019; Umurengezi, 2019; The New Times, 2021), illustrating how successor factions continued to reproduce many of the strategic objectives and operational practices of the parent organization even as its formal structures weakened.

More broadly, the persistence of infiltration attempts, recruitment networks, intelligence activities, and periodic cross-border attacks helps explain why the FDLR remained central to Rwanda's security calculations long after its conventional military capabilities had declined. Threat perceptions are shaped not only by the organization's immediate military strength but also by its history of violence, its continued presence in eastern Congo, and its demonstrated capacity to adapt organizationally despite repeated military, judicial, and political setbacks. In this respect, the movement's significance derived not merely from what it could do militarily, but from the possibility that its surviving networks could be mobilized or reactivated in ways capable of threatening Rwanda's security and stability.

Armed Alliances and the Regionalization of Anti-Kigali Insurgency

The persistence of the FDLR as a security concern cannot be understood solely through its own military capabilities or intermittent alliance with FARDC. As the movement weakened militarily and experienced internal fragmentation, it increasingly relied on alliances with other armed groups operating in eastern Congo and the wider Great Lakes region. These partnerships enabled it to retain strategic relevance despite declining organizational cohesion. Particularly significant are the relationships established between elements of the FDLR and armed groups associated with Kayumba Nyamwasa's opposition networks. During the 2010s, the FDLR and factions linked to the Rwanda National Congress (RNC) and the P5 coalition increasingly converged around shared military and political objectives against the Rwandan government. Although these groups differed in ideological orientation and organizational history, they benefit from cooperation, logistical support, intelligence sharing, recruitment networks, and operational coordination in eastern Congo (United Nations Security Council, 2018, 2019, 2020). Several United Nations Group of Experts reports identified interactions between FDLR elements and armed groups affiliated with anti-Kigali political movements operating from Congolese territory. These reports highlighted the fluid nature of armed-group alliances in eastern Congo, where cooperation was frequently shaped by tactical considerations, access to resources, and shared adversaries rather than long-term ideological alignment. In this environment, organizational boundaries often became blurred as combatants, commanders, logistical actors, and political entrepreneurs moved between different networks while maintaining overlapping relationships (United Nations Security Council, 2019). The most visible manifestation of these linkages emerged through the activities of the Forces de Libération Nationale (FLN), the armed wing of the Mouvement Rwandais pour le Changement Démocratique (MRCD), a coalition of opposition groups associated with broader anti-Kigali political networks. The FLN claimed responsibility for attacks carried out in southwestern Rwanda in 2018, including operations in Nyabimata and surrounding areas of Nyaruguru District. These attacks subsequently became the subject of criminal proceedings against FLN and MRCD members, including Paul Rusesabagina and Callixte Nsabimana (Sankara). Subsequent investigations and judicial proceedings linked the FLN to armed structures operating from eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and associated the movement with members of the MRCD/P5 coalition (Kuteesa, 2021; Kimenyi, 2021; Sabiiti, 2021).

These attacks demonstrated that armed groups operating from eastern Congo continued to regard cross-border action against Rwanda as a viable strategy despite years of military operations and regional security cooperation. Their significance extended beyond their immediate military impact. They illustrated the continued ability of anti-Kigali armed networks to exploit the weakly governed spaces of eastern Congo as operational rear bases while drawing on transnational political, financial, and recruitment networks. More broadly, they underscored the extent to which eastern Congo remained embedded within wider regional security rivalries. Even as the FDLR's centralized structures weakened, its successor organizations, splinter factions, and allied movements continued to reproduce elements of its long-standing strategy of armed opposition to the Rwandan government. The persistence of these networks suggests that the security challenge associated with the FDLR extends beyond the organization itself and is increasingly embedded within a wider constellation of armed and political actors operating across the Great Lakes region. The growing interaction between the FDLR, RNC/P5 networks, FLN elements, and other anti-government actors reflects a broader process of insurgent networking in the region. Rather than functioning as isolated organizations, armed groups increasingly formed flexible and overlapping alliances based on shared adversaries, logistical requirements, and opportunities for mutual support. Such arrangements enhanced their collective resilience by facilitating the circulation of fighters, resources, intelligence, and operational experience across organizational boundaries. As a result, military pressure directed at a single movement often produced adaptation, regrouping, or realignment within a broader network rather than the permanent neutralization of the threat.

From a regional security perspective, these developments are particularly significant because they demonstrate that the threat posed by the FDLR cannot be assessed solely in terms of its independent military capabilities. Although the organization experienced leadership losses, defections, fragmentation, and a substantial decline in conventional military capacity, its continued participation in wider anti-Kigali networks enabled it to retain strategic relevance within Rwanda's security calculations. The persistence of these connections has also reinforced Rwanda's long-standing argument that eastern Congo continues to host armed structures capable of threatening its territorial security. Consequently, the FDLR's contemporary significance derives not only from

its own organizational capabilities but also from its position as a node within a broader network of armed actors whose activities continue to shape security policies across the Great Lakes region.

Leadership Decapitation, Organizational Adaptation and Armed-Group Reproduction

A recurring feature of the evolution of the FDLR and its predecessor organizations was the loss of senior leaders through military operations, arrests, defections, repatriation, and battlefield attrition. Successive regional and international initiatives sought to weaken the movement by removing key political and military figures, reflecting a broader assumption that targeting leadership would accelerate organizational decline (Jordan, 2009; Cronin, 2009). Although these measures often disrupted command structures and reduced operational capacity, they did not bring about the complete disappearance of the movement. The FDLR's experience therefore illustrates the limits of leadership-focused approaches when the wider political, military, and social structures associated with an armed group remain in place.

Leadership losses occurred through both coercive and voluntary means. Throughout the years, sustained military pressure, diminishing prospects for achieving strategic objectives, and opportunities for reintegration encouraged a number of senior commanders to abandon the insurgency and return to Rwanda. Some later assumed positions within state institutions, illustrating the scale of defections from the movement. Among the most prominent were Jérôme Ngendahimana, who later retired as a Major General; Séraphin Bizimungu alias Mahoro, who was reintegrated as a Brigadier General before later being incarcerated on genocide-related charges; retired Major General Paul Rwarakabije, former Commissioner General of the Rwanda Correctional Service; Brigadier General Evariste Murenzi, current Commissioner General of the Rwanda Correctional Service; Faustin Sebuhura; André Bizimana; David Turikumukiko; André Rurangwa; Juvénal Marizamunda, current Minister of Defence; and Thaddée Nzeyimana. Many returned with substantial numbers of combatants under their command, reducing the movement's manpower, recruitment capacity, territorial influence, and internal cohesion. As Jordan (2014) argues, leadership losses become particularly disruptive when they occur alongside declining confidence in the ability of an organization to achieve its objectives. In the FDLR's case, large-scale repatriation exposed growing disagreements over the future of the armed struggle and the viability of continued resistance.

The movement's external leadership also came under increasing legal and security pressure. Among the most significant developments were the arrests of Murwanashyaka and Musoni in Germany in 2009, the arrest of Mbarushimana in France in 2010, and the arrest of senior figures such as Laforge Fils Bazeye and Jean-Pierre Nsekanabo in 2019. These actions disrupted communication between diaspora-based political figures and commanders operating in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, weakened the movement's external political structures, and contributed to growing internal tensions. Nevertheless, their removal did not eliminate the broader military, economic, and social relationships associated with the organization. This finding corresponds with Jordan's (2014) argument that leadership decapitation is often less effective when authority and influence are dispersed across multiple actors rather than concentrated in a single leadership figure. The limitations of leadership-focused strategies were further demonstrated during successive military campaigns against the FDLR. Operations such as Umoja Wetu, Kimia II, Amani Leo, Sukola II, and subsequent FARDC-MONUSCO offensives killed or captured numerous commanders and reduced the territorial presence of FDLR factions. These campaigns significantly weakened the movement, contributed to losses in personnel and resources, and disrupted command structures. However, they were generally more successful in degrading particular units than in dismantling the wider networks through which armed activity continued. As a result, military pressure reduced the movement's capabilities without fully removing it from eastern Congo's conflict environment. The killing of Sylvestre Mudacumura in September 2019 represented one of the most significant leadership losses in the movement's history. As commander of FOCA, the FDLR's military wing, Mudacumura occupied a central position within the organization for many years and linked different phases of its development. His death weakened military coordination and contributed to further fragmentation. However, it did not eliminate the local relationships, recruitment channels, economic activities, and command networks associated with the movement. This outcome supports Cronin's (2009) argument that leadership removal rarely ends entrenched insurgencies when the broader conditions sustaining them remain unresolved. Similarly, Mampilly (2011) demonstrates that armed groups embedded within local political and economic environments often survive the loss of individual leaders.

Leadership losses also intensified disagreements concerning military strategy, political objectives, relations with local communities, and prospects for repatriation. Over time, these tensions contributed to the emergence of competing centres of authority and accelerated fragmentation within the movement. Earlier disputes had already produced splinter organizations such as RUD-Urunana, but the most significant rupture occurred in 2016 when Wilson Irategeka broke away from the FDLR and established the Conseil National pour le Renouveau et la Démocratie (CNRD-Ubwiyunge). The split reflected growing disagreements over leadership and strategy and resulted in a separate military and political organization that attracted substantial numbers of combatants and commanders (United Nations Security Council, 2018; United Nations Security Council, 2019).

The emergence of RUD-Urunana, the CNRD, and other successor factions illustrates how fragmentation became an increasingly important characteristic of the movement's later evolution. Rather than resulting in demobilization, internal divisions generated new armed groups whose membership, support bases, ideological narratives, and operational environments frequently overlapped with those of the parent organization. Combatants and commanders often moved between factions while maintaining existing local relationships and political objectives. Although fragmentation weakened the FDLR's internal cohesion, it did not eliminate many of the relationships through which armed activity continued. Former FDLR structures frequently reappeared under different organizational labels while preserving longstanding military, political, and social linkages. As one United Nations official interviewed for this study observed, "groups split, commanders change, names change, but many of the networks remain."

The FDLR as a Regional Spoiler in DRC-Rwanda Relations

The evolution of the FDLR from a defeated military force in exile into a deeply embedded regional armed actor has had profound implications for relations between Rwanda and DRC. What began as a movement rooted in the post-genocide refugee crisis gradually became intertwined with broader regional security dynamics, transforming it from a predominantly insurgent organization into a durable political and security actor within the Great Lakes region. Its continued presence has reinforced Rwandan security concerns, complicated Congolese state-building efforts, and contributed to the persistence of proxy warfare and interstate mistrust. The significance of the FDLR cannot be understood solely through assessments of its military capabilities. Although its operational strength has declined considerably over time, the organization continues to shape regional security calculations, diplomatic engagements, and peace initiatives. Its influence derives not only from what it can do militarily but also from what it represents politically and strategically to regional actors. Building on the preceding analysis of the movement's historical evolution and entrenchment in eastern Congo, this section examines the FDLR as a regional spoiler. Drawing on spoiler theory, armed-group transformation literature, and Regional Security Complex Theory, it argues that the FDLR has become both a product and a driver of regional insecurity. Its persistence reflects not simply the survival of an insurgent organization but the endurance of an unresolved regional security problem that continues to affect relations between Kigali and Kinshasa.

Understanding the FDLR Through Spoiler Theory

Stephen Stedman's (1997) influential concept of spoilers refers to actors who perceive peace processes as threatening their interests, identity, or ideological objectives and who therefore seek to obstruct or undermine negotiated settlements. Importantly, spoilers do not derive their influence primarily from military strength. Rather, their significance lies in their capacity to perpetuate insecurity, disrupt political agreements, and prevent the consolidation of stable post-conflict orders. Viewed through this framework, the FDLR represents one of the most consequential spoilers in the Great Lakes region. Since its emergence in the aftermath of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, the FDLR has consistently challenged the political order established in Rwanda. Although the movement's discourse has evolved over time, shifting from explicit calls for armed overthrow of the Rwandan government to language emphasizing democratization, refugee rights, political inclusion, and national dialogue, it has continued to reject the legitimacy of the post-genocide state and has maintained an anti-Tutsi ideological orientation both in Rwanda and in the region. In this respect, the FDLR exhibits characteristics associated with what Stedman (1997) describes as a "total spoiler," namely an actor whose core political objectives remain fundamentally incompatible with the political settlement underpinning peace and state reconstruction. This incompatibility helps explain the limited success of repeated initiatives aimed at encouraging the movement's demobilization, repatriation, and political disengagement. While individual members and factions have defected or accepted repatriation, the movement as a whole has

consistently resisted efforts designed to dissolve its armed structures and abandon its long-standing opposition to the Rwandan state. As a result, the FDLR has remained a recurring source of instability despite military defeats, leadership losses, sanctions, and disarmament programmes. The significance of the FDLR as a spoiler extends beyond its direct actions. Its continued presence in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo has shaped regional security policies, influenced military deployments, and contributed to persistent tensions among Rwanda, the DRC, and Burundi. The movement's existence has also provided both a justification for, and a catalyst of, regional intervention, proxy warfare, and competing security agendas. Consequently, the FDLR's influence derives not only from its own activities but also from the reactions it provokes among neighbouring states and armed actors. In this sense, the movement has become embedded within a broader regional security dilemma in which its continued presence reinforces cycles of mistrust, militarization, and recurrent conflict across the Great Lakes region.

The FDLR and Rwanda's Security Calculus

No issue has exerted a greater influence on Rwanda's security policy toward eastern Congo than the continued

presence of the FDLR. Since 1994, Rwanda has viewed the organization not simply as another armed group but as the institutional successor of forces responsible for the Genocide against the Tutsi. This historical association gives the movement a significance that extends well beyond its contemporary military capabilities. From Rwanda's perspective, the FDLR represents both a material and symbolic threat. Materially, as the evidence discussed shows, the organization has maintained cross-border networks, recruitment structures, intelligence activities, and intermittent armed operations directed against Rwanda. Symbolically, its continued existence serves as a reminder that elements associated with the former regime responsible for the Genocide that took the lives of more than a million Tutsi population remain organized, armed and active within the region. As a result, threat perceptions are shaped not solely by assessments of military strength but also by the movement's historical origins, ideological identity and potential for political regeneration. These perceptions help explain why Rwanda treats the presence of the FDLR in eastern Congo as a national security issue rather than a purely Congolese problem.

Buzan and Wæver's (2003) Regional Security Complex Theory provides a useful framework for understanding these dynamics. The theory argues that security interdependence causes the threats confronting one state to become closely linked to those of its neighbours. Within the Great Lakes region, the FDLR functions as a connecting threat that links the security environments of Rwanda, DRC and now Burundi. The movement's continued presence in eastern Congo ensures that instability within the Kivu provinces has direct implications for Rwanda's security perceptions, while Rwanda's responses to that perceived threat in turn affect security dynamics inside the DRC. The result is a pattern of mutual securitization in which developments on one side of the border are interpreted through the lens of security threats on the other. Even when the FDLR's military capabilities have declined, its continued existence has reinforced arguments favoring forward defence, regional military engagement, and sustained vigilance toward developments in eastern Congo. The FDLR has therefore become a central component of a broader regional security dilemma for as long as measures adopted by Rwanda to enhance its security are frequently perceived by Kinshasa as threatening, while Congolese efforts to counter perceived Rwandan influence often involve alliances with armed actors that Kigali regards as hostile. This dynamic has important implications for contemporary peace initiatives in the Great Lakes region. Security cooperation ultimately depends upon the existence of credible security guarantees among participating states. Yet the continued presence of the FDLR complicates efforts to establish such guarantees. Consequently, regional peace processes often confront a fundamental contradiction: they seek to strengthen cooperation between states whose security perceptions remain shaped by the unresolved question of the FDLR. Until this contradiction is addressed, efforts to build trust and sustainable security arrangements are likely to remain fragile.

The FDLR and the Reproduction of Proxy Warfare

The continued existence of the FDLR has contributed significantly to the reproduction of proxy warfare and regional security competition in the Great Lakes region. While the movement's military capabilities have declined over time, its strategic significance has persisted because of its position within a broader system of interstate rivalry involving Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and increasingly Burundi. Rather than functioning as an isolated armed organization, the FDLR became embedded within a complex

network of alliances, counter-alliances, and competing security agendas that transformed local insurgency into a regional security problem.

From the perspective of Regional Security Complex Theory cited earlier (Buzan&Wæver, 2003), the FDLR significance extends beyond its own actions and derives increasingly from the security responses it generates throughout the region. The persistence of the FDLR has also exposed a fundamental contradiction at the heart of regional security politics. Successive regional initiatives, United Nations resolutions, and bilateral agreements have called on the Congolese government to disarm and neutralize the FDLR. Yet, faced with recurrent rebellions associated with Rwandan influence, including the CNDP and M23, elements within the Congolese security establishment have often viewed the movement as a useful military partner rather than solely as a security threat.

This tension has complicated efforts to eliminate the FDLR, as measures intended to address Rwanda's security concerns have at times conflicted with the security calculations of actors within the DRC. In practice, initiatives aimed at dismantling the FDLR have often implied the removal of an actor that some Congolese military and political stakeholders regarded as strategically useful in countering rival armed movements. As a result, the implementation of commitments to neutralize the FDLR has frequently confronted political and security constraints that extend beyond the organization itself. In recent years, these dynamics have expanded beyond the bilateral Rwanda-DRC relationship to include Burundi. The deployment of Burundian forces in eastern Congo in support of the Congolese government against M23 has increasingly linked Burundi to the broader conflict system, assuming a growing role within the coalition opposing M23 and Rwanda. At the same time, tensions between Kigali and Bujumbura have intensified amid accusations, counteraccusations, and competing threat perceptions regarding armed groups operating along their shared borders. The result has been the emergence of a triangular security dilemma involving Kigali, Kinshasa, and Bujumbura. Rwanda views the military cooperation among FARDC, Burundian forces, and armed groups operating in eastern Congo through the lens of its long-standing concerns regarding the FDLR. Burundian and Congolese authorities, in turn, frequently view Rwanda's regional security posture and its relationship with M23 as evidence of interference in their internal affairs. These competing narratives have deepened mistrust and contributed to the further regionalization of the current conflict. Particularly significant are recurring reports of FDLR participation alongside actors opposing M23 in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. The United Nations Group of Experts have documented evidence that FARDC, the Wazalendo coalition, Burundian National Defence Force (FDNB) forces, and the sanctioned FDLR have operated on the same side of the conflict against M23 (United Nations Security Council, 2024). From Kigali's perspective, these developments confirm that the FDLR remains embedded within military networks operating along Rwanda's western frontier. At the same time, they highlight a fundamental contradiction at the heart of regional security politics. Successive regional initiatives, United Nations resolutions, and bilateral agreements have called on the Congolese government to disarm and neutralize the FDLR. Yet, faced with recurrent armed movements with Rwandan influence, including the CNDP and M23, elements within the Congolese security establishment have at times viewed the movement as a useful military partner rather than solely as a security threat. In this sense, demands for the neutralization of the FDLR have often required Congolese authorities to dismantle an armed actor that some stakeholders regarded as contributing to their immediate security objectives. This contradiction has complicated the implementation of commitments to disarm the movement and helps explain its continued resilience. More broadly, the significance of the FDLR derives less from its independent military capabilities than from its continued role within a wider system of regional security competition. While the emergence of armed movements such as the CNDP and M23 cannot be reduced to the existence of the FDLR alone, the group's continued presence has remained one of several factors sustaining regional threat perceptions, security competition, and incentives for proxy mobilization. As several diplomats and regional security officials interviewed for this study observed, the FDLR has become both a consequence and a driver of proxy warfare. Viewed through the combined lenses of Regional Security Complex Theory and spoiler theory, the movement therefore operates as a strategic node within a wider regional security network, perpetuating competing threat perceptions and complicating efforts to establish a stable and cooperative regional security order. The persistence of these dynamics helps explain the limited effectiveness of successive regional peace initiatives. Diplomatic agreements can establish ceasefires, monitoring mechanisms, and frameworks for cooperation, but they struggle to produce durable outcomes when the strategic incentives that sustain proxy relationships remain largely unchanged. In this regard, the challenge confronting regional diplomacy is not simply the

continued existence of armed groups, but the persistence of a security environment in which such groups continue to serve political and military functions for regional actors.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study suggest that the continuing relevance of the FDLR is less a function of its military strength than of the regional political conditions within which it operates. Although the movement emerged from networks associated with the former regime responsible for the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi and has been implicated in repeated episodes of violence against civilian populations, its persistence is best understood as a consequence of wider regional dynamics. Weak state authority, competing security agendas, interstate mistrust, and the recurrent use of armed proxies have created an environment in which the organization has remained embedded within regional conflict systems. The FDLR therefore represents not merely an unresolved legacy of the genocide, but a symptom of deeper structural tensions that continue to undermine peace and security in the Great Lakes region. The article contributes to literature in three respects. First, it provides a long-term historical analysis of the FDLR that links organizational continuity across successive institutional forms often studied in isolation. Second, it shows how armed-group durability is shaped not only by internal adaptation but also by the wider regional environment in which such groups operate. Third, it advances understanding of the FDLR's contemporary significance by demonstrating that its influence derives less from its military capabilities than from its embeddedness in regional security dynamics and interstate rivalries involving Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and increasingly Burundi. This persistence suggests that the organization endures not because it is exceptionally strong, but because the regional environment continues to generate functions that it performs. Over time, the FDLR has become a repository of unresolved security fears, a vehicle for regional competition, and an instrument through which state and non-state actors pursue short-term strategic objectives. Its longevity therefore exposes the limitations of approaches that focus on managing insecurity rather than resolving its underlying causes. From this perspective, the significance of the FDLR extends beyond the organization itself. Its continued existence reflects the failure of the region to move from a logic of strategic rivalry to one of collective security. As long as armed actors remain available as instruments of statecraft, every peace initiative will remain vulnerable to reversal and every security arrangement vulnerable to mistrust. The FDLR occupies a particularly important place within this dynamic because its historical origins, ideological legacy, and continued military presence ensure that it remains uniquely destabilizing within Rwanda's security calculations while simultaneously retaining utility for actors seeking leverage in eastern Congo. The consequence is that the movement exerts an influence disproportionate to its military capabilities. The central implication of this study is therefore not simply that the FDLR remains active, but that its continued survival has become increasingly incompatible with the emergence of a stable regional order. As long as the movement remains embedded in regional security calculations, efforts to construct durable cooperation between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo are likely to remain vulnerable to recurring crises and mutual suspicion. The eradication of the FDLR should therefore be understood not only as a military objective but also as a prerequisite for the development of a more stable regional security architecture in the Great Lakes region.

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Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that there are no known financial or non-financial competing interests in any material discussed in this paper.

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Author contribution

Emmanuel Nibishaka: Conceptualization, methodology, data collection, analysis, interpretation of results, writing, review, and editing.

Declaration of use of AI in the writing process

The author declares that Generative AI was not used in the writing of this manuscript.

Ethical approval statement

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Nelson Mandela University FPGSC Higher Degrees sub-committee of the Faculty of Arts Faculty Postgraduate Studies Committee (Reference Number: No. H/15/ART/PGS-005). All procedures performed in this study complied with the ethical standards of the institution and with relevant research ethics guidelines.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

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