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Since November 1996, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) rebel group have operated in the Rwenzori borderland of western Uganda and eastern Congo. Despite having to contend with offensives by the Ugandan and Congolese armies, as well as the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission, the ADF have proven themselves to be extremely resilient. In such a hostile military environment - in which rebel movements typically last only a few years before being either expelled from their territory, forced to disband, or made to reform to such an extent that the original movement is all but eclipsed - the ADF have not only survived, but learned to thrive.

Their resiliency has largely been understood through the prism of Islamic extremism. The force has been seen as a radical Muslim group intent on terrorizing the Ugandan regime. One of the original founding factions of the ADF was a disaffected Ugandan Muslim group, the Tabliqs. They were responsible for operationalizing various lucrative transnational networks for the ADF, such as funding from foreign Islamic charities and countries. Yet, seeing the ADF only through the prism of Islamic terrorism has proven to have serious flaws. The authenticity of the religious dimension is questionable at times, and ADF camps greatly differ in how Islamicised they are. While many Ugandan and Congolese Muslims join the ADF through Islamic networks, there are also more practical motivations with regards to recruitment: poverty, unemployment, frustration with the government, or false promises of future opportunities. Indeed, there are many recruits who join for reasons that have no connection to Islamist networks at all.

My PhD research has argued that the source of the ADF's resiliency does not simply lie, as many have argued, in their Islamist leanings. Rather, to understand why they have become so entrenched we should instead look to the particularities of borderlands, and how the ADF have been able to integrate into the cross-border economic and political networks. In this conference paper I would like to build from this, and look at how attempts to quell the ADF by the UN peacekeeping force have been - perhaps misleadingly - influenced by the extremist Islam narrative of the ADF. From just a preliminary examination of this issue, it appears that framing the ADF in this way has meant that other pivotally important strands of the group have become side-lined by conflict management actors, if not ignored altogether.