

Media Matters: How Operation Shujaa Degraded the Islamic State's Congolese Propaganda Output

By Caleb Weiss and Ryan O'Farrell

Just three years ago, the Islamic State's Central Africa Province was the poster child for the Islamic State's efforts to maintain a constant and lingering threat across the globe. That year, the group conducted a series of regional terrorist attacks across Central and East Africa, and expanded inside the Democratic Republic of the Congo. More importantly, it produced a plethora of propaganda releases, making it one of the most active Islamic State's affiliates on the continent. Today, this has largely changed. While still a serious and deadly threat inside Congo and beyond, its propaganda output is a shell of its former self. This decline is, in part, thanks to the current joint Ugandan-Congolese operations against it.

In 2021, the Islamic State's Central Africa Province (ISCAP), which is known locally as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), witnessed a meteoric rise in its propaganda output. Three years later, this output is a shadow of its former self. Though this could quite possibly change in the future, over the last year, and particularly over the last six months, the Islamic State's central media apparatus has struggled to release media from its Central African affiliate.¹

For example, in 2021, as previously outlined by the authors and their colleagues at Bridgeway Foundation for this publication, the Islamic State produced around 280 photos and four videos that were originally taken by its Congolese affiliate.² The following year, another 256 photos and nine videos were published from Congo.³ It was not until 2023 that this output started to decline significantly, with the entire year seeing just 92 photos from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).⁴

To be clear, attack claims have continued on a relatively steady pace, with an average of 10.5 claims per month over the last six months.⁵ But whereas ISCAP was previously able to back up many of these claims with photographic evidence, it has only released 29 photos in the same timeframe, with only eight of those coming in the last three months.⁶ Hardly any of its claimed operational activity now receives any photographic evidence.

The explanation for this significant decline is likely twofold. First, the joint Ugandan-Congolese military campaign, Operation Shujaa,⁷ has pushed ISCAP out of many of its former strongholds, keeping the jihadis on the move, and into areas with poor internet/mobile internet connections.⁸ The steady pace of operations has

likely impacted ISCAP's ability to provide a steady stream of media back to the Islamic State's central apparatus. Second, the Islamic State's global media production was at a nadir in 2023 wherein propaganda from most of its global affiliates has been down.⁸ To caveat, however, this lasted until earlier this year when the Islamic State's spokesman, Abu Hudhayfah al-Ansari, announced a new global campaign on behalf of Muslims suffering in the current war in Gaza, dubbed the "Kill Them Wherever You Find Them" campaign.⁹ Since this campaign, Islamic State's global media production has been somewhat revived.

Declining ISCAP Media

As noted, ISCAP propaganda output since it first began publishing such material is at an all-time low. In the first three months of 2024, just eight photos have been released from the DRC. Almost all of this media has been released within the Islamic State's weekly Al Naba newsletter,¹⁰ which compiles the Islamic State's global operations over the previous week. As a result, these photos have thus often been published a week (or more) after the initial attack. In the past, ISCAP was able to send such media back to the Islamic State's media apparatus for publication either on the same day as an operation or the following day.¹¹ It is possible that ISCAP has sent the images in a more timely fashion and the Islamic State itself is saving the images for the next week's Al Naba issue, but this seems unlikely as it would negatively affect the Congolese affiliate as it delays the release of additional propaganda it could use to back up its claims.

It is also important to point out that in addition to the decline in the sheer number of media products released, there has been a noticeable decline in the overall quality of what gets published. For instance, in a previous article for this publication, the authors and others noted that much of ISCAP's propaganda in 2021 clearly tried to mimic the overall aesthetic of media typical of the Islamic State, such as dressing in a uniform manner in black *kanzus*, the hyper-violence of beheadings and other executions, and highlighting 'Islamic' virtues in everyday camp life.¹² These are now gone. With the exception of the deadly bombing in Kasindi, DRC, in January 2023, which killed 17 people,¹³ and the October 2023 killing of two foreign tourists in western Uganda,¹⁴ ISCAP's media over the last year has been relatively lackluster. What is mainly shown to

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a The area of Mambasa, a territory in Congo's Ituri Province, is densely forested with minimal cell coverage that helps to limit ISCAP's ability to effectively communicate quickly.



Congolese soldiers patrol the village of Mwenda, which was attacked by Islamic State militants, in Rwenzori Sector, northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo, on May 23, 2021. (Alexis Huguet/AFP via Getty Images)

the world now is sporadic captured weapons from the Congolese military (FARDC), an occasional FARDC barracks on fire, or a killed civilian.¹⁵ Large photo sets attempting to mimic the grandeur of the Islamic State's media from the heyday of its territorial caliphate in Iraq and Syria are no longer produced by ISCAP. Instead, the little media that trickles out appears utilitarian, meant only to check a box that some media gets back to the central apparatus showing that ISCAP was active over the previous week.

To note, this article largely deals with ISCAP's public facing media output, or rather, the media officially released by the Islamic State on its behalf. As such, it does not take into account more local propaganda channels, such as those operated by ISCAP on both Telegram and WhatsApp.¹⁶ However, while those channels serve an important purpose in propagating internal lectures, sermons, cell phone recordings, and photos taken by ISCAP members themselves, and any media produced by other Islamic State affiliates,¹⁷ they no longer otherwise appear to release any unofficial media produced by the group. Whereas ISCAP once had its own internal propaganda outlets, such as Ashabul Kahf Media or Mujahideen TV,¹⁸ especially between 2019 and 2021, videos under these internal labels are no longer produced and its media for outside consumption is wholly through the Islamic State.^b So though this article does not account for the group's local propaganda channels on popular encrypted messaging apps, it still provides for a good understanding of the

group's current dynamics in relation to its official media output.

Understanding the Decline

Launched in late 2021 following a triple suicide bombing in Kampala, Uganda, Operation Shujaa, was at first slow to make effective gains against ISCAP. Though initially targeting the group's leadership and more historical camps, this did little to prevent violence perpetrated by the group. In the first 10 months following the launch of Operation Shujaa in late November 2021, the number of civilians killed by ISCAP averaged 115 per month, with more than 100 civilians killed in each month except one.¹⁹ Moreover, while initial operations pushed ISCAP out of some areas, such as Watalinga chiefdom near the border with Uganda or near Boga and Tchabi in southern Ituri,²⁰ the group has frequently reappeared in those areas in subsequent months as Operation Shujaa has shifted focus elsewhere.²¹ Starting in September 2022, however, Operation Shujaa appears to have begun to show some results. Between September 2022 and October 2023, only three months have seen civilian fatalities over 100, while 14 of 20 months prior to September 2022 saw a civilian death toll over 100.²² ISCAP's capacity to inflict deadly violence against civilians remains extremely high—local civil society recorded 23 killed in seven attacks over four days in one area alone in late January 2024²³—but the rate of civilians killed by the group does appear to be trending downward overall.

It is thus likely that the nature of the military pressure faced by ISCAP, and how the group has reacted to that pressure, has been a key factor in the precipitous decline in its media output. As Operation Shujaa has repeatedly forced the group's camps to relocate, the constant movement has likely disrupted the group's

^b It is likely that the Islamic State central leadership, or at least leaders within its media apparatus, directed ISCAP to stop producing unofficial media in order to be uniform in propaganda output.

ability to collect and transmit reports and media of their attacks. And as the group has been forced farther into Congo, it has entered areas with more limited mobile network coverage than its historical strongholds in Beni. In one part of Mambasa territory where ISCAP has established a presence, for example, only one mobile phone tower provided service.²⁴ The tower had been damaged during an ISCAP attack in October 2022, and persistent insecurity has since prevented its repair.²⁵ With claims and media being transmitted to the Islamic State's central media apparatus through encrypted smartphone apps, ISCAP's movement into areas with limited mobile network coverage almost certainly hinders the group's ability to transmit reports and media to the propaganda cells that publish them, even as violence remains significant.

At the same time, it is also likely that the Islamic State's overall global decline in its propaganda output played a role in ISCAP's propaganda decline. As noted by Mina al-Lami at the BBC's Monitoring Service, the Islamic State's overall output suffered greatly throughout 2023 with less propaganda being produced across the board.²⁶ Since the aforementioned "Kill Them Wherever You Find Them" campaign, however, the Islamic State's daily media output has again picked up pace.²⁷ The best example of this resurgence can be seen by ISCAP's sister organization, the Islamic State's Mozambique Province.^c Since the beginning of the year, in the same timeframe that ISCAP has only released eight photos, Islamic State Mozambique has been able to produce 179 photos and one video.²⁸ The Mozambique Province, which for a period of time had a very limited output, particularly between September and December 2023, now leads the Islamic State's global propaganda output so far for 2024.²⁹ ISCAP propaganda has not recovered in the same way; suggesting its current predicament in the DRC is a

bigger factor in its media messaging problems than the weakening of the Islamic State's central media apparatus in recent years.

Conclusion

Although this article documents and assesses the sharp decline in ISCAP's propaganda output, it is important to state emphatically that this does not mean the group is no longer a threat on the ground. It very much is a real threat to those communities surrounding its ever-changing areas of operation. For instance, in the last several months, dozens of people have been killed in a series of massacres in North Kivu's Beni territory and Ituri Province's Irumu and Mambasa territories.³⁰ While it appears that Operation Shujaa has had success in creating significant impact in the digital realm, Ugandan and Congolese government forces must not be complacent on the ground. Additional efforts must be made with regard to civilian protection as the counterinsurgency effort seeks to take over more territory from ISCAP and take out its key commanders. This dynamic is not dissimilar to the threat ISCAP posed prior to undertaking its first public media output in 2016, in that it remained a deadly threat with virtually zero propaganda publicizing such atrocities.³¹ The fact that it is no longer producing propaganda at the same capacity as previous years does not mean that the group is itself moribund or on the verge of inactivity.

This should not take away from the significance of the impact military operations had in the digital space. This is a so-called battlefield of its own, which is especially coveted and highly prioritized by the Islamic State. The Islamic State needs this propaganda to feed its violent expansionist ideology, attract support, and show the world it remains a threat across much of the globe. Without the key digital ammunition that is propaganda, the Islamic State and its global branches appear weak. This decline could very well change in the future, as in the case of the Islamic State's Mozambique Province, but as of the time of publication, the joint Ugandan-Congolese Operation Shujaa appears to have significantly eroded the Islamic State's Central Africa Province propaganda capabilities. **CTC**

c Prior to May 2022, the Islamic State's Mozambique affiliate was under the purview and ostensible command of ISCAP. As part of an Islamic State central reorganization effort that month, the Mozambican affiliate was granted its own so-called provincial status and is now autonomous of ISCAP, though the two likely still coordinate on some issues.

Citations

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