

# CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: A CONFLICT MISUNDERSTOOD

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**Cover Photo:** 'Main Street, Paoua, north west Central African Republic (CAR)' by Simon Davis / United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID)





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The democratic election of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra in the December 2015-February 2016 presidential elections offered hope of a new era for the Central African Republic, which has long been troubled by periodic surges in violence. However, the window of opportunity created by the election to implement a successful peace agreement and introduce necessary institutional reform to promote national unity is rapidly diminishing. Over the last few months, the security situation in CAR has been deteriorating as ex-Séléka and anti-Balaka rebel groups continue to fragment and turn to criminality to sustain themselves. Most notably, fighting around Bambari between the Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (UPC) and the Popular Front for the Renaissance in the Central African Republic (FPRC) has intensified in recent weeks and violence across the region has turned increasingly inter-communal.

Against the backdrop of a deteriorating security environment, the humanitarian crisis continues to worsen, driving further criminality and conflict. More than half of the estimated 4.6 million population of CAR remain dependent on humanitarian assistance, the highest United Nations (UN) per capita case load globally. This number is likely to increase this year, as many communities, dependent on farming, have been unable to plant crops due to increasing insecurity and subsequent displacement.

While fighting between ex-Séléka and anti-Balaka has widely been reported as a religious conflict between Muslims and Christians, the reality is much more complex. CAR has for decades been a place of exploitation by a multiplicity of foreign actors. A weak state and the relational nature of CAR's sovereignty has resulted in a hive of competing regional and international interests that hold influence over the country's political and security landscape, often through opaque bilateral relations. A history of conflict has undermined social cohesion and destabilized traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, and violence has become a tried and tested route to power.

Both the international community and Central African government's emphasis on stabilizing CAR during the periods of conflict, without addressing its root causes, has served only to create intermittent stability and a negative peace. A history of basing peace negotiations and Demobilization, Disarmament, and Reintegration (DDR) initiatives on access to political power has also incentivized politico-military entrepreneurs and perpetuated cycles of conflict.

The international community and the CAR government needs to commit to long-term and sustained initiatives which focus on addressing the root causes of violence in the country. The CAR government must be cognisant of the role they play in driving conflict, take greater ownership of reconstruction efforts, and avoid abdicating governance to the international community.

Furthermore, as recognized in the National Plan for Recovery and Peacebuilding (RCPCA), arising out of the 2015 Bangui Forum, efforts must be made to decentralize power by empowering provincial and local government, especially in historically marginalized regions. The potential for a deepening of the religious cleavages between Muslim and Christian Central Africans needs to be addressed through policies of inclusion. This should involve empowering traditional Muslim leaders in the North, as well as ensuring increased representation of Muslim Central Africans in all levels of government.

Crises in CAR have for decades been mischaracterized, mismanaged, or forgotten by the international community. Today, there exists a closing window of opportunity to build on recent political developments and begin CAR down a road towards national reconciliation. However, the international community will have to commit considerably more resources to this process, as well as play a part to ensure regional and individual actors, such as Michel Djotodia and François Bozizé, do not look to destabilize ongoing peace processes for their own political ambitions.

A failure to act will see CAR backslide into widespread violence. Moreover, CAR presents many of the preconditions for the emergence and spread of violent extremist activity, such as the existence of geographic safe havens, illicit financial streams, religious cleavages, and pools of marginalized and desperate youth. The infiltration of CAR by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Boko Haram, the Islamic State, or Al Shabaab, would further regionalize and internationalize CAR's conflict, enflame already strained intra-Muslim and Muslim/Christian relations, and add additional layers of complexity to an already multifaceted conflict landscape. Understanding the dynamics and roots of conflict in CAR is a necessary first step on the road to the prevention of violent extremism in the country. It is on the basis of this understanding that effective action must be taken to prevent potential scenarios to develop into reality.

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# SITUATIONAL OVERVIEW

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On 16 February 2017, United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) forces fired on the the FPRC as the rebel group crossed a designated “red line” outside the town of Bambari, 250 km (155 miles) northeast of the capital Bangui. The FPRC’s top commander, Joseph Zonduko, in addition to several other rebel fighters were killed (Reuters, 2017). Since November 2016, fighting between the mostly Fulani UPC and the FPRC around Bambari has intensified, reflecting ongoing challenges of the newly formed government led by President Touadéra to broker an effective end to hostilities and institute a strategy of disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, and resettlement (DDRR) among the countries 14 most active rebel groups.

The latest wave of violence to have emerged in CAR began in late 2012, which pitted the Séléka, a predominantly Muslim coalition of rebel groups from the north, who overthrew former President François Bozizé in a coup, against anti-Balaka – a network of Christian self-defence militias that rose up in response (Kleinfeld, 2017). In 2014, the African Union and French international forces pushed the Séléka out of Bangui before the UN formally took over peacekeeping operations. In December 2015, a new constitution was approved by the transitional government and in February 2016, Faustin-Archange Touadéra won the presidential election in a run-off.

A year after his election, President Touadéra has been unable to extend his authority much beyond the capital and at least 60 percent of CAR remains under the control of an assortment of rebel militias (Kleinfeld, 2017). While the country’s most recent conflict is often oversimplified as a religious battle between Christian and Muslim forces, the reality is much more complex. By 2014, disagreements over resource control and strategy disputes among the Séléka leadership led to the group splitting into several factions, predominantly along ethnic lines, who fight each other for control of resource rich areas and seasonal migratory movements. Most notably, the UPC and FPRC split after Nouredine Adam, leader of the latter, demanded independence for CAR’s predominantly Muslim north, a move opposed by UPC leader Ali Darassa (Kleinfeld, 2017). FPRC fighters and allies from another ex- Séléka group, the Central African Patriotic Movement (MPC), have joined with a faction of the anti-Balaka (which itself has split into two factions) to fight the UPC. Rebel groups consistently target civilian communities thought to be allied with their enemies, which has led to multiple incidents of gross human rights violations. For instance, on 12 December 2016, in the town of Bakala, rebels from the UPC executed 25 civilians after calling them to a local school for a meeting and then forced locals to help throw their bodies into a nearby well (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

This recent resurgence of violence, especially in the **central and northern central regions of CAR**, around Bambari, Kaga Bandora, and Bria, comes as rebel group leaders attempt to exert pressure over the political process and strengthen their negotiating positions within ongoing regional mediation efforts and the CAR government’s Committee on Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Repatriation – which has been signed onto by 12 of the 14 main armed groups (Weyns et al, 2014). To help peace and mediation efforts, attempts have been made to try and reunite the ex-Séléka. However, these have failed. The movement held a general assembly on 18 & 19 October 2016 in Bria. While the FPRC participated, the event was boycotted by the MPC and UPC. The assembly’s final declaration was to call for increased dialogue with the government while expressing their intention to exercise authority in areas under their control (United Nations Security Council, 2017).

In the **north-west** of the country, criminality has increased as a result of competition between rebel militias and bandits fighting for control of seasonal migratory routes and the cattle market (United Nations Security Council, 2017). Most notably, the Return, Reclamation, Rehabilitation group (3R), made up of mostly Muslim cattle herders, which formed in late 2015 to protect the local Puehl population from attacks by Christian Anti-Balaka, has allegedly been responsible for a number of gross human rights violations among civilian populations in the west of the country and displaced thousands in the region (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

In recent months, the **east of CAR** has seen an increase in incidents attributed to the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). This comes as a result of a reduced presence of Ugandan military operating in CAR under the auspices of the African Union Regional Task Force (United Nations Security Council, 2017). In the towns of Nzako and Sam Ouandja, LRA has taken over bases vacated by the Ugandan military and an increase in the group’s activity is foreseen until the end of dry season (Invisible Children, 2017).

CAR's recent crisis has exacerbated **tensions between pastoralists and farming communities**. As GSRDC (2016) note "Conflicts have commonly been polarised between pastoralists and farming communities, particularly because of competition for natural resources (land and water). With the state failure, soldiers in the CAR army, "road-cutters" and armed groups have made a great deal of money out of the pastoralists. As a consequence, pastoralists have become even more militarised, and high levels of insecurity have led them to change their routes, which has led to an escalation of conflicts and violence between pastoralists and farmers." (pg.19) With the disruption of historic cattle routes, increasing banditry and cattle theft, and competition around increasingly scarce grazing and water access conflict between pastoralists and farming communities is likely to increase in the near future. This if further problematized as pastoralist communities in CAR are predominantly Muslim, thus adding fuel to religious and sectarian tensions.

While **the capital Bangui** has generally remained calm, significant tensions remain between Christian and Muslim communities which has led to sporadic flare ups of violence. The most recent occurred in October, after the death of a Central African soldier which triggered retaliatory killings between Muslim and Christian communities, leaving 11 dead (BBC, 2016). That same month, public demonstrations calling for the departure of MINUSCA turned violent, leaving 4 dead (Reuters, 2016). However, neither the national police force nor the military have the capacity to maintain control of Bangui, and without the presence of MINUSCA troops, especially around the predominantly Muslim enclave of PK5, violence between religious communities would likely revive.

The cost of ongoing violence in humanitarian terms has been immense. More than half the estimated 4.6 million population of CAR remain dependent on humanitarian assistance, the highest UN Per Capita case load globally (UNOCHA, 2017). Recent estimates of internally displaced persons are around 411, 785 while the number of refugees in neighbouring countries is 478,848. This means 1 in 5 Central Africans are either internally or externally displaced (UNOCHA, 2017). Last year, the International NGO Safety Organization (INSO) identified CAR as the most dangerous country in the world for humanitarian aid workers (Baddorf, 2017). The majority of the health sector in the country is run by international NGOs', such as Doctors Without Borders (Médecins sans Frontières). However, due to increased violence in several regions, some have evacuated personnel leaving a skeleton staff to maintain operations. CAR ranks in the lowest ten countries in the world in the United Nations Gender Inequality Index (UNDP, 2015). And in 2016, over 11 000 cases of gender-based violence were recorded nationally (UNOCHA, 2017).

The CAR humanitarian crisis is the most poorly funded globally. In 2016, UNOCHA's Humanitarian Response Plan garnered only 36 percent of the \$532 million calculated as necessary for operations (UNOCHA, 2017). In 2017, the Humanitarian Response Plan amounted to \$399.5 million. However, to date, only 4.4 percent of this amount has been committed by donor countries (UNOCHA, 2017). Furthermore, an estimated two-thirds of Central Africans rely on agriculture for survival. However, due to violence around the rainy season few have been able to plant crops. Therefore, it is likely the number of people in need of food assistance will increase considerably this year.

# TIMELINE

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- 1894** ----- Area named Ubangi-Chari is established as a dependency by the French.
- 1910** ----- Ubangi-Chari is integrated into the Federation of French Equatorial Africa.
- 1958** ----- The territory gains self-government within French Equatorial Africa and Barthélemy Boganda becomes prime minister.
- 1960** ----- David Dacko becomes president of now-independent Central African Republic (CAR).
- 1962** ----- President Dacko makes the country a one-party state. The Movement for the Social Evolution of Black Africa (MESAN) becomes the only legal party.
- 1965** ----- Army commander Jean-Bédél Bokassa overthrows Dacko in a successful coup d'état.
- 1976** ----- Bokassa dissolves the government and replaces it with the *Conseil de la Révolution Centrafricaine* (Central African Revolutionary Council) crowning himself emperor in the renamed 'Central African Empire'.
- 1981** ----- Bokassa is overthrown in 1981 by the French Government and David Dacko is reinstated as President.
- 1981** ----- André Kolingba overthrows President David Dacko in a bloodless coup d'état.
- 1993** ----- President Kolingba's military rule ends with election of President Ange-Félix Patassé.
- 2003** ----- President Patassé is ousted by François Bozizé who had previously served as Brigadier General under Bokassa and as Minister of Defense under Dacko before leading a rebel group in the North, declares himself president.
- 2007** ----- Three rebel groups – the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity, the Union of Republican Forces and the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace – form an alliance called 3.
- 2012** ----- A coalition of primarily northern rebel groups sign an agreement forming the Séléka (alliance) and take up arms in the north and centre of the country.
- 2013/03** ----- Séléka rebels overrun the capital and seize power. Bozizé flees. Rebel leader Michel Djotodia suspends the constitution and dissolves parliament in a coup condemned internationally.
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- 2013/08** ----- Séléka leader Michel Djotodia, who served after the January agreement as First Deputy Prime Minister for National Defense, declares himself president.
- 2013/09** ----- On 13 September 2013, Djotodia formally disbands the Séléka, which he had lost effective control of shortly after taking power. This had little effect in stopping abuses by the militia soldiers who now began being referred to as ex- Séléka.
- 2013/09** ----- United Nations Security Council approves deployment of UN peacekeepers.
- 2013/12** ----- French send new contingents to CAR amid signs of increasing lawlessness and violence.
- 2014/01** ----- UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) officially takes over operations from the African-led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic (MISCA).
- 2014/01** ----- Michel Djotodia and Prime Minister Nicolas Tiangaye resign on 10 January 2014. On 20 January 2014, Catherine Samba-Panza, the mayor of Bangui, is elected as the interim president
- 2014/07** ----- The Brazzaville Negotiations take place, bringing together representatives of the Ex- Séléka and anti-Balaka armed groups. The Brazzaville Agreement is signed which includes the cessation of hostilities by armed groups in the entire territory of CAR; waiving any proposed partition of the country; repatriation of all mercenaries to their respective country of origin with the support of international forces; and the promotion of a reconciliation process.
- 2015/01** ----- President Sassou Nguesso sponsors meetings in Nariobi to allegedly address failures of the Brazzaville Agreement and bring together two warring factions: the FPRC led by Nourredine Adam and a pro-Bozizé anti-balaka faction led by Maxime Mokom.
- 2015/05** ----- The Bangui National Forum, a national reconciliation conference organized by the transition government, is held. This results in the adoption of the Republican Pact for Peace, National Reconciliation and Reconstruction and the signature of a Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Repatriation (DDRR) agreement among several armed groups.
- 2016/02** ----- Prime Minister Faustin-Archange Touadéra is elected president in a peaceful election.
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# 1. THE ROOTS OF CONFLICT

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## 1.1) THE IMPACT OF HISTORY

Today's conflict in the Central African Republic must be understood in historical context. For centuries, the country has been a place of exploitation by a multiplicity of foreign actors. Before French colonists arrived in CAR around 1885, the region was dominated by sultans connected to trans-Saharan economic and social networks. The area became both a zone for slave traders who supplied the Saharan and Nile River slave routes, and refugee communities fleeing these raiders (Lombard, 2014). For example, by 1875 the Sudanese sultan Rabi' az-Zubayr had created an empire around the Upper-Oubangui (modern day CAR) trading slaves to Khartoum (Horowitz, 1970). These dynamics contributed to the diversity and mobility of the region's peoples and the strong tradition of self-defence and resistance among communities targeted by outside forces.

On arrival in the region in the late 19th Century, the French colonists quickly set out to undermine the power of the sultanates and establish their own rule. In 1920, French Equatorial Africa was established and administered from Brazzaville. As Carayannis & Lombard (2016) write: "Rather than develop an administration, from 1899 to 1930, French colonial officials leased the territory to private companies to run for their own profit (or loss)." These companies forced local populations to harvest rubber, coffee and other commodities, often without pay, and proceeded to strip the region of assets as quickly as possible. As McCormick (2015) notes: "Between 1890, a year after the first French explorers arrived in Bangui, and 1940, about half of the population died as a result of colonial violence or the disease that followed in its wake." Protestant Missions were established to spread Christianity and further undermine the power of the sultanates.

Opposition to colonial authorities and the recruitment and mistreatment of local populations by concessionary companies further contributed to the culture of resistance and self-defence among local communities. However, there was never a single unified resistance to French occupation that merged the country's disparate ethnic groups and may have helped to create a common narrative on which to build an independent state. Rather, alliances between various ethnic groups constantly shifted as some struck deals with concessionary companies, some traded with Fulani-Muslim slave merchants, while others chose to resist. The most unified anti-colonial act of resistance was the "War of the Hoe-Handle", where the Gbaya, Banda, Mandjia, and Mboum ethnic groups supported each other and fought the colonial administration for three years (1928 – 1931) before eventually being defeated (Lombard, 2014).

This fractured social landscape has created deep distrust between communities, and between the general population and central government. Furthermore, the lack of government administration or investment in the North of the country adds to the narrative that the government does not care about its Muslim citizens – many of whom already share greater social connections with communities in Chad and the Sudan. This in turn helps ferment opposition against Muslim Central Africans by Christian Central Africans by adding to the narrative that Muslim Séléka forces, supported by foreign powers, are trying to "Islamize" Central African society. This is evidenced by radio broadcasts which, when Séléka forces were moving toward Bangui in 2013, warned Christian citizens that "the wahhabists are coming" and that they were "waging *jihad*".

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## 1.2) OUTSOURCING GOVERNANCE AND THE RELATIONAL CHARACTER OF CAR SOVEREIGNTY

Rather than develop local administrations during the French colonial period, officials leased territory to private companies to exploit the country's rich resources (Lombard, 2014). This system has effectively continued since independence, with new international actors buying mineral concessions in return for the provision of basic services and infrastructure. CAR's natural wealth has for years flowed out of the country rather than been used for local development. Increasing cycles of poverty and conflict have left the government unable to provide services to its people. These services have been largely subcontracted out to international organizations, such as the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU). This has created a system whereby CAR politicians are often more

concerned with the personal relationships they hold with these outside sources of power than with fulfilling their social contract with CAR citizens. This has resulted in a weak state that has little capacity or political will to govern beyond the capital. The government's failure to provide services to outlying regions in the North and East is a major grievance and a key driver of conflict. This in turn perpetuates the cycle of conflict, poverty, grievances, and the further subcontracting of governance to international organizations.

The outsourcing of governance to external actors means that the most important sources of power in CAR lie outside the state (Lombard, 2014). For example, security is largely the role of France, the EU, and the UN. International NGO's such as Doctors Without Borders (MSF) and the International Medical Corps are responsible for health care outside the capital. The UN provides the bulk of economic, development, and humanitarian assistance to citizens – the sustainability of which is dependent on the international donor landscape.

## External Actors

CAR's **regional neighbors** are also highly influential in the internal processes of the state. Since the country's independence, there have been five coups, all of which have been backed by external actors. For example, in 2003, **Chadian President Idriss Déby** decided to replace the CAR president Ange-Félix Patassé, with François Bozizé – who overthrew the incumbent president with a force predominantly made of up Chadian militia. It was these same militias who, after feeling betrayed by Bozizé, swelled the ranks of the Séléka and helped Michel Djotodia take power in Bangui in 2013. Djotodia was unable to exercise control over the many militias constituting the Séléka alliance – who quickly spread throughout the country, ruling towns violently as their own chiefdoms. This in turned generated the local discontent which swelled the ranks of the anti-Balaka. A year later, after President Déby grew tired of Djotodia's inability to stabilize the situation, forced him to stand down, airlifted the entire CAR government to N'Djamena, where Catherine Samba-Panza was elected as the President of the transitional government (Lombard, 2014).

Over the last two decades, conflicts in **Darfur and Chad** have exacerbated the instability within CAR and further grown the influence of both states in Bangui. The North-East of CAR has historically been used as a safe haven and operational base for Chadian and Sudanese rebel groups, both allegedly supported by each other's government in the Darfur conflict and civil war in Chad (Campbell, 2006). In 2013, it is estimated that Chadian and Sudanese mercenaries made up 80 percent of the Séléka (FIDH, 2014).

**Angola, the Republic of Congo, and Cameroon**, also each have relationships with CAR which regularly shift depending on a variety of political, economic, and security concerns. For example, since 2014, **Angola** has become increasingly involved in the CAR peace process, strengthened bilateral relations with the country, and provided increased military support (African Defense, 2016). The two countries signed an agreement related to governance and humanitarian issues. The financial protocol of the agreement included a donation pledge of \$10 million (Soudan, 2014). Furthermore, in 2015, Angola took the presidency of the Kimberly Process, from which CAR has been suspended since early 2013. Under Angolan leadership there has been a push to partially resume diamond exports from CAR (Dunkhan, 2016). In September 2016, Angolan minister for Geology and Mining, Francisco Queiroz announced the signing of a cooperation deal with CAR to provide assistance through the state owned National Diamond Prospecting, Exploration and Polishing Company (Endiama) to CAR's diamond mining sector (Angop, 2016). Angola has also recently been involved in hosting talks with ex- Séléka leaders.

**The Republic of Congo** has also had a strong influence over recent peace processes in CAR, yet the goals behind their strategy remains unclear. In 2015, President Sassou Nguesso, who was appointed by Economic Community of West African States (ECCAS) as chief mediator, facilitated the organization of the 'Nairobi Talks.' These ran parallel to ongoing local peace talks and thus were perceived by President Samba Panza, as an effort to delegitimize the transitional government, and a way of Sassou Nguesso to gain favour in the eyes of the international community (Dunkhan, 2016). Furthermore, since 2014, the Republic of Congo has been hosting the leader of the FPRC Abdoulaye Miskine which, as Dunkhan (2016) notes "demonstrates Sassou Nguesso's interests in exerting influence or control over this armed group." Cameroon's interests and influence in CAR are also difficult to determine. As Dunkhan (2016) writes "While most of the ECCAS heads of state supported Michel Djotodia as new president of the transition. Paul Bia decided to host Francois Bozizi following the Séléka coup for a period of two months. Following this episode, Cameroon adopted a low profile in the political resolution of the CAR crisis, whereas economic interests have remained." Cameroon's port of Douala represents the main transit point for the majority of CAR's imports and exports. The porous border between the two states also means that diamonds, gold, ivory, and cattle are regularly smuggled from CAR into Cameroon.

The multiplicity of external actors involved in CAR and the opaque bilateral relations which characterizes the relationships between the country and its neighbors can make it difficult to understand the political landscape in Bangui. Furthermore, due to so much power in Bangui deriving from external actors, government officials are often more concerned about their relationship to these actors than to citizens of CAR.

However, as Carayannis & Lombard (2016) write: "Understanding these border-crossing dynamics without imposing static regional frames would better illuminate both the national dynamics at play and how these shift and travel. In contrast to the picture of a shapeless, amorphous political space that emerges in most accounts of this so-called failed state, there is instead, a hive of competing authorities across the country and the region born of specific historical relationships and dynamics."

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### 1.3) CYCLICAL CONFLICT AND POLITICO-MILITARY ENTREPRENEURS

Violence has become a tried and tested route to power in CAR. Under President Bozize, the Central African Army (FACA) was reduced to a presidential guard and the police purposefully kept weak out of fear of a coup, of which the country has experienced five since independence (Global Security, 2016). This has left the Bangui government unable to defeat rebel forces nor effectively police its territory against bandits and militias who extort local populations. Furthermore, as International Crises Group (2015) notes in their September 2015 report *Central African Republic: The Roots of Violence*, "Ex- Séléka combatants and their leaders have had a long career as rebels. Changing from one movement to another, they never really put down their arms in recent years and have long been part of the political and security landscape in CAR." With a closed political system governed by a political elite and no other means of accessing political power, creating armed groups and rebellions is a way for politico-military entrepreneurs to get a position within the Bangui government and access to profits garnered by exploitation of the country's resources.

The state has a long history of incentivizing this behavior by co-opting rebel leaders during negotiated peace settlements and offering them government posts (International Crises Group, 2015).<sup>1</sup> Even if this process did not in the long term simply contribute to the cycle of rebellion, peace agreements, and co-option of rebel leaders, many of these rebel groups have diffuse chains of command and identifying reliable interlocutors who truly speak on behalf of a whole group is difficult.

The international community's emphasis on stabilizing CAR during the country's episodic violence, without addressing the root causes of conflict, has merely created intermittent peace and further contributes to this trend. The African Union, UN, Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), ECCAS, and France have all intervened in CAR since its independence (Lesueur, 2016). France's 'Operation Sangaris', its seventh military intervention since the country gained independence in 1960, was named after the African butterfly *Cymothoe Sangaris* which has a short lifespan to emphasize the intended brevity of the intervention (AFP, 2012). However, the focus of these interventions is usually to restore order and achieve elections or a negotiated settlement before making a quick exit. This leaves the difficult process of managing the formation of a new government to a weak state and leaves regional players and rebel leaders with strong influence over the process (Lesueur, 2016).

Today's DDRR programme, instituted by President Archange and signed onto by 12 of the country's 14 most active rebel groups follows the same logic of trading short-term stability and the cessation of fighting, for access to political power, immunity, and the integration of rebel fighters into the military. While this may seem a sensible strategic route in the short-term to create stability, it is difficult to see how it will achieve long term peace in CAR.

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<sup>1</sup> The February 2007 the Syrte peace agreement was signed by government and the FDPC, which called for the integration of FDPC fighters into FACA and integration of the FPDC into government. In April 2007, the Birao Peace Agreement was signed between the UFDR which called for the integration of rebel fighters into the FACA and government. The same has been true for the Libreville 2008 peace agreement and various others.



## 1.4) JUSTICE AND IMPUNITY

In Bangui and elsewhere, suspected perpetrators from CAR's recent 2012/2013 conflict often still live with impunity side by side with their victims. The absence of a system capable of prosecuting or condemning these perpetrators of violence is acutely felt by communities as a threat to their security.

The formal justice system in CAR is very weak and has been further weakened by recent fighting which saw the destruction of legal records and flight of legal personnel from the country. There are few functioning courts outside of the capital, and just eight of the country's 35 prisons are operative. Poor security and prison infrastructure has also led to multiple prison breaks (McCormick, 2015). In recent years, the police force has been reduced from 3500 to fewer than 2500 today. Furthermore, a deep sense of distrust towards the police and state institutions, which are both seen as simply serving the political elite, means that few cases are brought before courts and vigilante or "public justice" often becomes the de facto method of dealing with criminal activity.

A number of structural issues impede access to justice in CAR. Marc (2012), argues that access to justice is compromised along three social axes. First, economic and social contexts play a major role, whereby those with the financial means or political connections can obtain favorable rulings. Second, gender plays a significant role, as women are not treated with the same level of respect as men before the formal justice system. And third, minority groups such as the pygmies and migrant herders are particularly marginalized from accessing justice and therefore susceptible to higher levels of exploitation and victimization.

Traditional justice mechanisms used outside of the capital are also weak resulting in small disagreements between members of different communities quickly escalating into intra-community violence. As Marc (2012) writes, "For the past two centuries Central Africa has weathered a series of upheavals which severely undermined social cohesion and left communities grasping for ad hoc means of resolving conflicts and enforcing norms... while traditional and customary rules and laws have been drawn asunder and forgotten."

Outside of the capital, village chiefs are among the most important figures in providing conflict resolution and justice, and are usually the first point of contact between the state and the community. However, traditional systems have been widely disrupted by conflict in recent years. While 'l'arbre de palabre' still functions in parts of the country, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent and their efficacy. Furthermore, the 'traditional' system of elected '*chefs de quartier*', which has been recently revived in Bangui, is often viewed as corrupt and dysfunctional among local citizens.

Over 50 percent of cases brought before the formal justice system involve cases of alleged witchcraft or sorcery. However, traditional healers are much more widely used in cases of alleged witchcraft, whereby they will be consulted to determine who is responsible and prescribe a course of treatment. Formal legal systems are ill equipped to deal with the subjective and circular logic that passes for evidence in witchcraft cases (Marc, 2012). Furthermore, Marc (2012) notes "Part of people's hesitancy to take their disputes to the tribunal has to do with the fact that they do not see tribunals dispensing justice that is viewed as just... a dispute is not resolved until the parties have been reconciled, whether as a result of counsel, or payment of a compensation."

In June 2015, President Samba-Panza of the transitional government brought a law creating a Special Criminal Court (SCC) to investigate and prosecute grave human rights violations committed since 2003. It will be made up of 27 judges, 14 from CAR and 13 international judges who have a mandate to investigate and prosecute the international crimes committed in the country since 2003. However, the SCC faces a number of major challenges. First, the court is estimated to have an operating cost of 40 million USD for the next five years. However, only 5 million USD has been committed thus far. There is a lack of skilled investigators in the country and investigations will be difficult to carry out due to ongoing insecurity. Misreporting on the SCC risks raising public expectations about what the court can actually achieve, which may lead to further public anger and frustration around the issue of impunity. Moreover, the type of justice dispensed by an international criminal court will most likely not be understood as "just" in the eyes of the general public.

## 1.5) THE LACK OF A UNIFYING HISTORICAL NARRATIVE AND WIDESPREAD TRAUMA

CAR has a population of approximately 4.7 million people dispersed widely over an area of 620,000 square kilometers. Due to the country's history, its geographic location, and proximity to other regional conflicts (which have contributed to cross-border flows of refugees) the nation is divided into over 80 ethnic groups. The largest ethnic groups however are the Baya, Banda, Mandjia, Sara Mboum, M'Baka, Yakoma and Fulani. Some ethnic groups have more in common with communities in neighboring states and each share different historical experiences as Central Africans. For example, the North-Eastern prefecture of Vakaga with its capital in Birao is primarily populated with Muslim communities who share strong cultural and language ties with Sudan and Chad. Muslim Central Africans from the North-West region however, mostly Foulbe and Haussa, share stronger ties with West Africa. There are also historic divisions between local Central African agriculturalists and pastoralists whose cattle herding routes cross the country from East to West.

Rather than the state acting as a central authority, due to the history of the region and historic role of foreign actors in the country, ethnic groups share loyalties between a variety of authorities. Thus, developing a cohesive national identity in this context is challenging.

More recently, religion has become an increasingly divisive force in the country. Both the Séléka and anti-Balaka should be understood as diffuse mobilizations of a range of actors, rather than structured organizations with clear chains of command (Lombard, 2014). However, on both sides, religion has been used opportunistically by leaders to mobilize support and perpetrate acts of violence. Today in Bangui, there are frequent incidents of violence between Christian and Muslim Central Africans, and without a heavy UN troop presence, inter-religious violence would likely quickly spiral out of control. Both sides can draw on history to give life to their anti-Christian or anti-Muslim narratives. While Christian anti-Balaka leaders may reference the Muslim slave trade and the influence of outside "jihadist" forces, Muslim Séléka leaders draw on the history of Christian colonialism and the idea that the predominantly Christian government does not care about its Muslim citizens.

Furthermore, there seems to be no shared understanding or collective picture as to what led to the 2013 conflict in CAR. Limited access to media, the opaque role of regional actors, and a dispersed population with low literacy rates, means that people often hold widely varying beliefs as to the causes of conflict in CAR. The country's society exhibit signs of collective trauma, such as high levels of distrust and suspicion among and between citizens at the individual and community level. This creates an enabling environment for a range of conspiracy theories to circulate that can be used conflict actors to manipulate and gain support among communities.

## 2. FACTORS OF RESILIENCE

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A number of factors (potentially) contribute to resilience in CAR to the recurrence of large scale violence. Many of these are however only temporarily available and will lose relevance if adequate follow-up on recent political developments are not taken quickly. The political class and constructive international forces must exploit this window of opportunity by addressing the aforementioned root causes and take advantage of available factors of resilience.

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### 2.1) SUCCESSFUL ELECTIONS AND A NATIONAL RECOVERY AND PEACEBUILDING PLAN

Despite recent fighting between the ex-Séléka groups around Babmari, the general security situation in the country has improved since 2013. After two years of transition, Faustin Archange Touadera won the presidency in February 2016 – with 63 percent of ballots cast in an election that was competitive and peaceful. In a country where military coups have become a de facto manner in which power is transferred, this represents an important milestone for the political process and a window of opportunity towards developing a sustainable peace. A relatively high voter turnout also indicates a strong desire by Central Africans to put an end to the conflict.

A roadmap for development and stabilization has also been laid out in the National Recovery and Peacebuilding Plan (RPPCA), which was approved by the CAR government in October 2016. The RPPCA is accompanied by a Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), which for 2017 is projected to cost \$41.2 million USD. However, to date, just \$19 million USD has been committed by donor countries (UNOHCA, 2016). On 17 November 2016, the international donor conference for CAR was held to show solidarity and pledge the necessary financial support for the RPPCA and HSP. The event aimed at securing \$1.5 billion in funding for recovery and peacebuilding for the next three to five years. However, so far, only a fraction of this amount has been committed. (UNOHCA, 2016).

### 2.2) THE BANGUI NATIONAL FORUM AND THE POTENTIAL FOR NATIONAL RECONCILIATION

National reconciliation in CAR will be a difficult process that will require sustained political will and considerable structural reform. Two of the most fundamental challenges in creating an environment in which national reconciliation can begin in truth, is to considerably diminish the threat of armed groups and develop trust between Bangui and regions outside of the capital.

The Bangui National Forum and a new Presidency both serve as a window of opportunity for addressing these issues so that the process of national reconciliation can begin. However, this window will not stay open indefinitely. The longer government delays on delivering on promises and instituting much needed structural reform, the higher the chance of CAR backsliding into widespread conflict, diminishing the prospects for national reconciliation.

In May 2015, the Bangui National Forum was organized by the transitional government, bringing together around 700 politicians, representatives of civil society groups and others to discuss the country's future. The Forum resulted in the adoption of the National Plan for Recovery and Peacebuilding (RCPCA) and the signing of a Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Repatriation (DDRR) among armed groups (RCPCA, 2015).

While this was an important milestone for CAR, it should not be an isolated event and needs to be sustained through subsequent inclusive dialogues which keep lines of communication open. This will require international support and increased donor funding. The failure to do so will result in a return to the exclusionary politics which have proven so divisive in the past.

## Silencing the Guns

According to the DDRR agreement, former combatants (who have not been charged with war crimes) will either be integrated into state security institutions—the army, police or national forestry and water commission—or become beneficiaries of income-generating community development projects (RCPCA, 2015). Shortly after taking office, President Touadera personally met with leaders of the country's 14 most active rebel groups in Bangui. Today, 11 have signed onto the DDRR agreement, and one more (the 3R), have committed to do so in the coming months – a positive step forward in stabilizing CAR. The FPRC and UPC, two the the country's most active rebel groups, have not signed and continue to engage in fighting.

However, as argued above, it is important that peace processes and the DDRR agreement does not serve to perpetuate cycles of violence by legitimizing and incentivizing politico-military entrepreneurs and promising rebel fighters integration into the army. As argued by Lesueur (2016) “a strategy centred on DDR programmes should be left behind in favour of a disarmament policy formulated around the wider fight against trafficking and major development projects to reduce the appeal of the war economy. As the latest clashes in April near Bouar demonstrated, control over resources, specifically precious minerals, is at the heart of the problem. MINUSCA should deploy international forces in the main diamond and gold mining sites to allow CAR's public servants to take up positions in the provinces and eventually help to revive the Kimberly process certification mechanisms, even in the east.”

## Decentralizing power to Legitimize Government

As recognized in the RCPCA arising out of the Bangui Forum (albeit somewhat understated), “Imbalances between Bangui and the rest of the country, as well as the marginalization of certain extremely poor regions, notably in the northeast, have nurtured frustration.” (RCPCA, 2015). Even in Bangui, there are high levels of dissolutionment towards government – who are often perceived as a self-serving elite. In regions outside Bangui, these feelings are likely compounded by the absence of state presence in the form of health care, education, sanitation, and infrastructure. To shift these perceptions and improve trust between the government of Bangui and its citizens, it is important that power and economic investment be more decentralized and efforts made to empower provincial and local government. This would also have the benefit of reducing the influence of foreign actors, long established in Bangui, on the country's political system.

These needs have been recognised in both the second pillar of the RCPCA and President Touadéra's decentralization plan. In addition, in March 2016 the President visited Obo in the far south-east and Vakaga in north-eastern region to emphasize his commitment to the process. Furthermore, the position of elected mayor has been reestablished after being abolished 25 years ago, which is in line with traditional practices of leadership ascending to power through local elections. The first pillar of the RCPA calls for the establishment of a Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Reconciliation Commission (RCPCA, 2015). However, as seen in other African contexts, Commissions dominated by an already politically compromised elite usually fail to achieve national buy-in. For CAR's TJRRC to be effective, it must be truly inclusive, be able to work independently, and not be seen as politically compromised. While local civil society in CAR is weak, there are relatively strong women's, youth, and student movements who are largely unrepresented in political institutions. Representation from these movements should be included in reconciliation processes, and religious leaders and civil society should be empowered to engage further.

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### 2.3) CHRISTIAN/MUSLIM RELATIONS AND THE PRESENCE OF RELIGIOUS PLATFORMS

Established religious platforms provide government with an opportunity to build trust and legitimacy, in addition to improving communication with citizens in outlying regions. For example, the National Interfaith Peace Platform, made up of Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga, Pastor Guerekoyame-Gbangou, and Im-am Oumar Kobine Layama have made significant contributions in trying to rebuild trust between Muslim and Christian citizens. This has included public calls over radio for all Central Africans to engage in a process of reconciliation and end cycles of reprisals, and a nationwide tour to initiative interreligious dialogue among Muslim and Christian communities



(WEA, 2014). As was shown by the impact of the visit of the Pope to CAR, religious narratives and reconciliatory language is of major importance and can help to contribute towards the reduction of sectarian tensions. Religious leaders, especially the Archbishop, have extensive networks that can be used to build trust between government and communities. However, it is important that religious platforms include religious leaders, particularly Muslim, from the North of CAR.

The Sultan of Ndele is an influential figure who occupies a position of historical and symbolic significance. His inclusion would help to bolster national reconciliation efforts and build government trust in a region where little exists.

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## **2.4) A COMMON LANGUAGE AND THE CHALLENGE OF BUILDING A NATIONAL IDENTITY**

CAR is one of the few countries in Africa that has a lingua franca. Most Central Africans speak Sangho, which makes mass communication easier and has the potential to link people together around a common feature. It is important that both civil society and government take advantage of this platform to advocate messages of inclusivity and non-violence.

Today, radio broadcasts from Bangui do not reach the North of the country. Investing in the necessary radio broadcast infrastructure would help to connect the capital with peripheral regions. It would also create a platform for honest and inclusive debate around the drivers of conflict in CAR. Narratives surrounding the causes of the 2012/2013 conflict differ widely in CAR. This lack of clarity and unity creates space for military entrepreneurs to use propaganda and conspiracy to mobilize popular support. Mass communication, made easier by a lingua franca, can be used to great effect in helping to develop a common understanding and narrative, build trust in government, and voice a roadmap for the future.

### 3. POTENTIAL FOR IDEOLOGICAL RECRUITMENT AND RADICALIZATION INTO VIOLENT EXTREMISM:

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The establishment of transnational terrorist organizations in CAR would add a new layer of complexity to an already multifaceted crisis. While CAR's rebel groups have generally been willing to negotiate with the government and sign onto peace deals, as seen in other contexts, violent *jihadist* organizations are not often unwilling to do the same. This generates intractable conflicts without political solution. Infiltration of CAR by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Boko Haram, the Islamic State, or Al Shabaab, would further regionalize and internationalize CAR's conflict and enflame already strained intra-Muslim and Muslim/Christian relations.

While claims that the ex- Séléka and other Muslim organizations have been infiltrated by violent *jihadist* elements are relatively common in CAR, ascertaining their validity is difficult, and the researchers found no clear evidence to prove the case. However, the country currently has several factors that are commonly understood as preconditions to the spread and emergence of violent extremism.

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#### 3.1) EXISTING PRECONDITIONS FOR RECRUITMENT AND RADICALIZATION INTO VIOLENT EXTREMISM

##### 3.1.1) Geographic Safe Havens

CAR has a number of preconditions for the emergence and spread of violent extremism. CAR is a vast country of 622,984 km<sup>2</sup>, much of which remains largely ungoverned, and shares porous borders with Cameroon, Chad, Sudan, South Sudan, Republic of Congo, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. This provides ample space for geographic "safe spaces", which as Byman (2008) writes, are used by violent extremist organizations to "plot, recruit, proselytize, contact supports around the world, raise money and – perhaps most importantly – enjoy respite from the enemy regimes counter-terrorism effort that enables operatives to escape the constant stress that characterizes life underground."

The LRA, for example, already uses the Eastern region of CAR as a safe haven to evade troops of the African Union Regional Task Force. Similarly, the North-Eastern region of the CAR has also long been used as a safe haven and operational base for Chadian and Sudanese rebel groups.

With increased military pressure on Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, and CAR's porous borders with (seemingly increasingly unstable) Cameroon and Chad, the country may provide a new safe haven for the group from which to operate and recruit. Furthermore, since 2014, the Democratic Republic of Congo has seen an increase in violent extremism, especially in the province of Northern Kivu – where the the Alliance of Democratic Forces – National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (ADF-NALU) is alleged to have established links with al-Shabaab (West, 2015).

##### 3.1.2) The Crime–Terror Nexus

The disintegration of the formal Séléka alliance and failure of the CAR's DDRR programme to bring the primary rebel groups to the negotiating table has seen the increase of criminality across the North of the country, as rebel groups turn to banditry to sustain themselves. As Phillips and Kamen (2014) write "Cooperation and imitation among crime and terror groups in recent years has given rise to a crime-terror nexus... symbiotic relationships between criminals and terrorists represent insidious threats to regional and international security wherever they exist." Illicit financial flows and the illegal trade of diamonds, ivory, gold, and other minerals, coupled with low levels of police or authoritative oversight, could provide important sources of income for transnational terrorist organizations operating in the region to exploit.

### 3.1.3) The Youth Bulge and Exploitation of Local Populations

Decades of conflict, corruption, and poor governance has generated a deep well of discontent towards the CAR government in communities both inside and outside the capital. A closed political class and an acute lack of educational or economic opportunity means the chance of the average Central African being able to change their station in life is small. CAR has an extremely young population with a median age of just 20.4 years, of which, 68 percent have not completed primary education, and the overwhelming majority hold no formal employment.

Many of these youth are idle, regularly experience food insecurity, have been traumatized by repeated exposure to violence, and feel marginalized by a political system which seems only to serve a political elite. This lack of hope and frustration provides a pool of potential recruits.

### 3.1.4) The Absence of a National Ideology and the Persecution of Muslims

Developing an inclusive national ideology in CAR, which may help promote resilience against extremist narratives, has always been a challenge. Before colonization, the area was populated by a disparate mix of ethnic groups. The Trans-Saharan slave trade, in addition to decades of influence over CAR's political system by Muslim Chadian and the Sudanese governments has perpetuated negative perceptions against Muslim Central Africans.

Likewise, the predominantly Muslim north of the country has been largely excluded from political power, held by a majority Christian political elite in Bangui. Over the years, the North has experienced little government investment in the form of health care, education, or economic investment and entire regions, such as Vakaga, are totally cut off from the rest of the country during the several months of the rainy season. Even today, only 2 members of the government in Bangui are Muslim, thus further perpetuating perceptions of religious exclusion. Séléka leaders, such as Djotodia, were quick to exploit these grievances as a way of mobilizing support against the central government and advocating for a secession of the North of the country and establishment of a "Republic of Logone, or Dar El Kuti."

While the majority of Central Africans have been exposed to conflict in one form or another since the country's independence in 1960, the recent 2013/2014 violence took on overtly religious overtones which has disproportionality affected the country's Muslim population. In Bangui, Muslim Central Africans have been scapegoated as sympathetic to violent *jihadi* and Salafi causes and there have been multiple documented gross human rights violations against Muslim citizens. Many Muslims in Bangui are afraid to leave the predominantly Muslim PK5 district for fear of being attacked due to their religious affiliation. Furthermore, widespread protests have been held against the erection of Mosques in the city. Muslims in PK5 reported feeling both threatened and humiliated by anti-Balaka groups and the continued presence of MINUSCA forces. Criminals routinely target Muslim communities as 'easy targets' knowing they are unlikely to report crimes to the police.

Today, Muslim/Christian relations in CAR are the worst they have been since independence. It is easy to see how in this environment, violent *jihadi* organizations could exploit the situation and offer an empowering new narrative for frustrated individuals within these marginalized communities. Furthermore, roughly half a million Central African refugees live in Cameroon, Chad, and other neighboring states already in close proximity to transnational terrorist organizations. Individuals from these communities could also be targeted for recruitment.

### 3.2) CATALYTIC FACTORS FOR THE EMERGENCE OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

While various preconditions for the emergence and spread of violent extremist organizations into CAR exist, it remains difficult to determine when or if the country will experience an emergence of local cells connected to wider transnational or global terrorist networks. However, there are a number of catalytic factors which may greatly encourage this development. First, would include a marked strategic interest from one of the several terrorist organizations operating in one of CAR's neighboring states. This may be in the form of geographic safe havens, illicit financial streams, the potential for recruitment, or others. The second, would be an accessible environment and strategic point of entry. This point of entry may be a specific community, or even a single influential leader with whom transnational terrorist organizations in the region can form a relationship. The third, would be the reduced relevance of voices of moderation. The continued deterioration of Muslim/Christian relations in the CAR, including the scapegoating of Muslim communities and branding of Muslims as "jihadist", could serve to be a self-fulfilling prophecy for the country – as transnational terrorist networks in the region may see an opportunity to seek relevance among individuals living in increasingly desperate circumstances. Further disappointment with the political process and lack of political representation, especially among Muslim populations in the North, coupled with the emergence of a charismatic local leader sympathetic to global *jihadist* narratives, may be all that it takes for transnational terrorist actors to gain a foothold in the country.

It is important that targeted preventative measures, such as increased Muslim representation in government, the empowerment of moderate (including women's) voices, the facilitation of interreligious dialogue at all levels, increased investment in areas historically disenfranchised, and symbolic gestures designed to reach out to the Muslim community are taken to mitigate the risk of the emergence and spread of violent extremism.

The development of a 'fact based' Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) program for the country is urgently needed. To be able to develop such a plan, further research is needed to determine if the allegations of violent *jihadist* activity within the country and CAR's refugee communities in neighboring states are true. Such a CVE program must be accompanied by wider conflict resolution mechanisms for all the reasons that are laid out in this report. Since the general unstable character of the situation in the CAR contributes to the potential for violent *jihadist* groups to infiltrate and recruit, contributing to stability and reconciliation will also contribute to the reduction of vulnerability to violent extremism.



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