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## **Central African Republic: Between France and Russia**

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The Central African Republic (CAR) has been described as the “periphery of peripheries,” a country which seems to be of very little interest to the rest of the world. Although rich in natural resources such as diamonds, gold and uranium, the government of CAR is unable to make use of them in such a way that would benefit the economy of the country. Landlocked, ravished by bloody civil wars, and heavily dependent on foreign military support, CAR has become synonymous with disaster.

In the current conflict in CAR, which began in 2012, thousands of people were killed and more than a million people were displaced.<sup>1</sup> The conflict is often seen as a struggle between the mostly Muslim ex-Séléka rebel militias and the mostly Christian anti-Balaka militias, although the reality is much more complex. A peace agreement between the government of CAR and leaders of 14 rebel militias that was signed in Khartoum in February 2019 gave a new twist to the conflict, yet did not stop militias from carrying out massacres.<sup>2</sup> France and Russia have militarily intervened in the conflict, both having an interest in the stability of the country, yet competing with each other for influence in CAR. This article analyzes the involvement of France in CAR, the coming to the fore of Russia as a significant player in CAR and the current rivalry between these two countries in CAR.

In November 2017 Russia received an exemption on the UN arms embargo on CAR and provided the CAR military with small weapons and ammunition. Since that time Moscow has expanded its military involvement. Moscow has provided a personal security advisor to CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadéra; has set up a major training camp south-west of the Bangui, the capitol, for the CAR army; and is known to have contacts among ex-Séléka militant groups and the ex-President and Russian-educated Séléka leader Michel Djotodia.<sup>3</sup> In February 2019 Russia flew 14 rebel leaders to Khartoum to sign the CAR peace deal. Russian involvement in CAR was an unwelcome development from the perspective of France, which had been the dominant external player in CAR since colonial times.

## **France in CAR and the Slide toward Military Intervention**

The region of Ubangi-Shari, which is located in present-day CAR, was part of French Equatorial Africa between 1910 and 1934 together with Chad, Gabon and Moyen-Congo. The period of French colonization of Ubangi-Shari was characterized by exploitation, inefficiency, neglect, and, at times, atrocities on the part of the colonial administration. At the same time, the local population staged insurrections against the colonial administration a number of times.<sup>4</sup> The legacy of the neglect and violence of the French colonial rule, and the subsequent rebellion against the ruling authority, are clearly visible in the events occurring in CAR today.

After independence in 1960, the Central African Republic remained heavily dependent on the support of France. Almost every leader of CAR came to power through a French-backed military coup.<sup>5</sup> François Bozizé, for example, came to power in a French-backed coup in 2003 after France had become dissatisfied with the lack of sitting President Ange-Félix Patassé's dependence on France. This chapter of CAR's history shows that no CAR leader was able to stay in power without the full support of France.

France's role in CAR changed with the coming to the fore of President Bozizé's successor Michel Djotodia in 2013. Bozizé's rule ignited what became known as the Central African Republic Bush War (2004-2008) in which several rebel movements fought against the central government. In 2008 Bozizé signed a peace deal with the rebels, which he failed to implement. Feeling betrayed by Bozizé, a number of former rebel militias established a new rebel coalition, named the Séléka. The Séléka consisted mainly of disenfranchised Muslim people from the northeast of CAR, as well as a considerable number of Sudanese and Chadian foreign fighters, who had been involved in the Darfur conflict (2003–), as well as the Chadian Civil War (2005-2010).<sup>6</sup> The Séléka made major military advances, and in 2013 took over power in CAR. Michel Djotodia, the head of the Séléka, became the first president of CAR who had come to power without the direct support of France.

After the Séléka take-over, anarchy ruled in CAR. Individual Séléka militia leaders made personal conquests throughout the country, attacking villages and killing many civilians, many of whom were Christian. Because Djotodia was unable to rein in his own rebel militia, he made the decision to dissolve the Séléka in September 2013. However, this decision failed to stop the killings and chaos. Since September 2013, the remnants of the Séléka have been called ex-Séléka militias. In the wake of the violence in CAR, self-defense groups merged to form a coalition called the anti-Balaka, which sought to defend their people from ex-Séléka attacks and to seek revenge. Even though the anti-Balaka fighters are mostly Christian and the ex-Séléka fighters are mostly Muslim, their struggle is political.<sup>7</sup> With anti-Balaka retaliatory attacks on Muslim villages, the conflict in CAR spiraled out of control. The international community feared imminent genocide. From this point in time France began intervening militarily.

## **France's Military Intervention in the CAR Crisis**

In December 2013 the UN Security Council adopted a resolution that mandated an African-led peacekeeping force in CAR, which became known as MISCA. France decided to support MISCA by setting up its own Operation Sangaris. This operation was named after an African

butterfly that has a short lifespan – it was meant to be of short-duration. Its goal was to “restore stability in the Central African Republic and to protect the population.”<sup>8</sup>

The reason for France’s involvement in the crisis was that France never fully relinquished its control over CAR. CAR still holds the colonial currency, the CFA Franc, it has its national reserves in the Central Bank of France, and it holds a large percentage of CAR’s foreign currency in the French Treasury. Also, France has many companies in CAR which exploit its natural resources.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, France had a vested interest in CAR’s stability.

Yet, the military operation in CAR was proving to be too costly for France. Even after Djotodia stepped down, the violence in CAR remained rampant and the peace process initiated by the international community was not going anywhere. Operation Sangaris was also criticized when reports emerged that French soldiers had sexually abused the local population.<sup>10</sup> After Faustin-Archange Touadéra was elected president of CAR in February 2016, France saw an opportunity to withdraw most of its troops and leave the peacekeeping to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). Yet, when Russia took advantage of France’s withdrawal, France discovered that Russia was poised to take its place.

### **Russia’s Involvement in the CAR Crisis**

France views Russia’s military presence in CAR and its provision of weapons to the CAR government with high suspicion. Moscow itself claims that it only has an interest in restoring the peace in CAR. From the perspective of France and other Western countries, however, Russia’s military involvement in CAR is widely seen as part of its larger struggle for global influence.<sup>11</sup> Many also think that Russia is mostly interested in trading weapons for natural resources, such as gold, minerals and rare earth elements, which are used for making electronic devices.<sup>12</sup> The details of CAR-Russia bilateral deals are not made public, which causes even more distrust on the part of France, the US and the EU.

What is also interesting about Russia’s military involvement is that not all military forces based in CAR are part of the Russian army. There are many private Russian security companies present in CAR; the infamous Wagner Group is likely to be among them. These kinds of shady private companies offer Russia the benefit of interfering in CAR with minimal political and military risks. On the other hand, private military companies can pursue their own interests and be a source of instability in a country where the major natural resources are situated in rebel-held territory and are being fought over by warlords.

In 2018 Russia interfered with African Union mediation between the CAR government and armed groups by setting up its own peace initiative together with Sudan. Russia’s move was heavily criticized by France and other international players, who saw it as a competition to the main peace negotiations. In 2019 the African Union managed to bring the Russia-Sudan initiative under its own auspices, which eventually led to the Khartoum peace agreement of February 2019. This agreement brought former rebel leaders to national and local positions in government, yet did not see the discontinuation of violence as was stipulated.

CAR President Touadéra maintains good relations with Russia, especially since he felt abandoned by France when it withdrew its peacekeeping force from CAR only shortly after his election in 2016. Many civilian residents of CAR see Touadéra's turn to Russia as a positive development for the country. They view French involvement in CAR as a mere continuation of meddling and exploitation which began in the colonial era. If another country can offer a counterweight to France's power and provide military support to prevent massacres from happening, they say, it is for the better.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

Rivalry between France and Russia in CAR is taking its toll on the peace process. To begin with, it is dividing the CAR government into "pro-France" and "pro-Russia" camps. Also, Russia has pursued its own peace initiative, which only later, and with much diplomatic effort, became part of the main African Union peace negotiations. Many CAR residents criticized the 2019 Khartoum peace deal, saying that it sacrificed justice in order to satisfy militias who continue their violence against civilians. Even though the UN and France have accepted this deal, it will require cooperation between Russia and France to direct CAR into a more peaceful path. With militia leaders in CAR government positions directing their gruesome attacks from Bangui, now is the time for cooperation between France and Russia to see a full implementation of the Khartoum peace deal.

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<sup>1</sup>"Central African Republic - Complex Emergency," *US Aid*, 2019.

<sup>2</sup>Peter Fabricius, "Central African Republic Still Racked by Conflict despite February Peace Deal," *Daily Maverick*, May 24, 2019.

<sup>3</sup>Andrew McGregor, "How Russia Is Displacing the French in the Struggle for Influence in the Central African Republic," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 74 (2018); Cassandra Vinograd, "There's a New Battle for Influence in Central Africa, and Russia Appears to Be Winning," *Washington Post*, May 31, 2018.

<sup>4</sup>Louisa Lombard, *State of Rebellion: Violence and Intervention in the Central African Republic* (London: Zed Books, 2016), 6–9; Thomas E. O'Toole, *The Central African Republic: The Continent's Hidden Heart* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1986), 21–24.

<sup>5</sup>Tatiana Carayannis and Louisa Lombard, "Making Sense of CAR: An Introduction," in *Making Sense of the Central African Republic*, ed. Tatiana Carayannis and Louisa Lombard (London: Zed Books, 2015), 4.

<sup>6</sup>Roland Marchal, "CAR and the Regional (Dis)order," in *Making Sense of the Central African Republic*, ed. Tatiana Carayannis and Louisa Lombard (London: Zed Books, 2015).

<sup>7</sup>Carayannis and Lombard, "Making Sense of CAR: An Introduction."

<sup>8</sup>"Operation Sangaris," *Ministère de La Défense, France*, December 10, 2013.

<sup>9</sup>Giorgio Spagnol, "Is France Still Exploiting Africa?," *Institut Européen Des Relations Internationales*, February 10, 2019.

<sup>10</sup>Sandra Laville, "UN Aid Worker Suspended for Leaking Report on Child Abuse by French Troops," *The Guardian*, April 29, 2015.

<sup>11</sup>"Russia, Central African Republic: Moscow To Deploy Military Personnel for U.N. Mission," *Stratfor Situation Report*, June 3, 2019; Vinograd, "There's a New Battle for Influence in Central Africa, and Russia Appears to Be Winning"; "Russia in Africa: Inside a Military Training Centre in CAR," *Al Jazeera*, April 14, 2019.

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<sup>12</sup>McGregor, “How Russia Is Displacing the French in the Struggle for Influence in the Central African Republic”; “Russia in Africa: Inside a Military Training Centre in CAR”; Marcel Plichta, “France and Russia Fiddle While the Central African Republic Burns,” *World Politics Review*, November 28, 2018.

<sup>13</sup>Author’s interview with CAR national in Tel Aviv, June 9, 2019.