

How at risk is the Central African Republic from violent extremism?

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Executive summary

This report examines the need for early warning and response on violent extremism in the Central African Republic (CAR). Between October and November 2021, over 30 stakeholders were interviewed in field research conducted in Bangui and Bouar. The research found that many of the drivers of extremism persist in the country, and that, as a result, the potential for exploitation by extremist groups is significant. The lack of inclusive economic development, the absence of state security and state structures, a youth bulge that is easily mobilised, and the manipulation of religious and ethnic identities are all key factors that can drive extremism if left unchecked. Despite the development of the National Prevention Strategy against Radicalisation and Violent Extremism, and the subsequent appointment

of a National Committee, a greater awareness is needed among the government and local population on the key elements of preventing violent extremism. In particular, it is necessary to focus on how to mitigate against the drivers of extremism that are utilised to manipulate youth actors to perpetrate violence and how to build resilience. This report makes recommendations for establishing and promoting a preventive approach to violent extremism in CAR.

Introduction

The Central African Republic (CAR) faces wide-ranging challenges that leave it vulnerable to multiple forms of conflict. The country has faced ongoing violence for decades and the situation remains precariously fragile, despite signing the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the CAR in 2019. In 2021, Faustin-Archange Touadéra took a second term in office, but the elections were undermined by ongoing violence. The implementation



of the Political Agreement has been slow, and demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) has been challenging.¹ In September 2021, Sant'Egidio, an international interfaith organisation with extensive experience in mediation, brought together political parties, civil society and religious organisations. The outcome, the Rome Declaration, advocated for inclusive dialogue and a ceasefire, among other things. Also in 2021, the Truth, Justice, Reparations and Reconciliation Commission (*Commission Vérité, Justice, Réparations et Réconciliation*, or CVJRR) began its work following the appointment of 11 commissioners.

Despite these efforts, the country remains at high risk of violent extremism. In the past, the religious tensions have been manipulated by leaders amid a backdrop of poverty, inequality, underdevelopment, marginalisation, a lack of safety and security, and dissatisfaction with government. CAR's geographical proximity to neighbouring countries that have suffered from terrorism leaves it vulnerable to extremist groups, should they see it as a strategic location. A military approach alone will not address the potential for conflict. In addition, foreign involvement also has the potential to inflame tensions. For example, the United Nations (UN) Working Group on mercenaries released a statement in March 2021 that expressed alarm about abuses by Russian military groups.² Human rights abuses are often a key driver of extremism.³

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It is clear that there is a need to develop early warning strategies to prevent the emergence of violent extremism. The country has developed a National Prevention Strategy against Radicalisation and Violent Extremism (*Stratégie Nationale de Prévention de la Radicalisation et de l'Extrémisme Violent*, or SNPREV), as well as an action plan, which were published and validated in 2018.⁴ A National Committee for the implementation of the strategy has been established, made up of designated focal points from government ministries and civil society actors. However, the plan has not yet been fully disseminated or put into action, due to a lack of funding and technical support. Some

societal members fear the stigmatisation of certain communities that could result from a preventing violent extremism (PVE) focus in the country.

PVE requires the development of up-to-date information and real-time analysis. As such, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) conducted a scoping study from 29 October to 13 November 2021, in Bangui and Bouar. Interviews were held with 35 stakeholders, including government officials; the National Committee for the implementation of the PVE plan; youth groups; religious leaders; civil society members; human rights, security and civil affairs experts from the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA); international non-governmental organisations (NGOs); embassies; and other international organisations.

This report first examines the rise of current tensions in CAR, and stresses that violence has not been attributed to strong religious ideologies, but rather to ethnic marginalisation as well as retaliatory and protectionist measures by armed groups. The conflict is not static but remains dynamic and there has been a change in allegiances and factions among the armed groups. The report then looks at the prevalence of extremism in the region, before focusing on the potential for the emergence of extremism in CAR. The report concludes by making policy recommendations on the way forward in terms of mitigating against the spread of violent extremism.

Rising tensions: A precursor to extremism?

The latest tensions in CAR began in 2012, when fighting began between the Séléka, a mainly Muslim armed militia coalition, and the predominantly Christian anti-balaka self-defence militias. In 2013, the then president François Bozizé was forced to flee after armed groups seized the capital, with Michel Djotodia subsequently proclaiming himself as president of the country. Extensive fighting continued, and after a transitional period, Touadéra was elected as president in 2016, replacing Djotodia. However, by 2015, many Central African Muslims from western CAR had left the country as a result of anti-balaka assaults. Since then, there have been ongoing attacks on Muslim communities. For example, in 2017, anti-balaka attacks on Union pour la Centrafrique (UPC) fighters led to a series of intercommunal clashes in the east, with at least 50 Muslims killed. In 2018, an attack on a Catholic Church in Bangui led to a series of retaliatory attacks on Muslims.⁵

Throughout this conflict, armed groups have manipulated religious narratives to further their cause. For example, Nourredine Adam and Abdoulaye Hissène from the Popular Front for the Rebirth of Central African Republic (*Front Populaire pour la Renaissance de Centrafrique*, or FPRC) have been strong proponents of ousting the government and partitioning the country with the stated aim of protecting the interests of Muslims.⁶ The UPC has also used the pretext of protection to expand territorially. At the same time, anti-balaka/self-defence groups have depicted the UPC and the Fulani as an invading foreign force, and this rhetoric has been extended to encompass the whole Muslim community.⁷ The Fulani are also known as the Peul/Mbororo/Fula community and are one of the largest ethnic groups in the Sahel and West Africa. They are nomadic pastoralists comprised of numerous subgroups sharing the common language Fula and Islam as a religion. Bozizé has also accused Muslims of threatening Christian communities, further driving anti-Muslim sentiment.⁸ Siriri are another group claiming to seek the protection of Muslims and are thought to be operational close to the Cameroonian border around Noufou, Gamboula and as far north as Nguia-Bouar.⁹

Moreover, the 3R movement (Return, Reclamation and Rehabilitation), purportedly formed to defend the Fulani community in northwestern CAR, has inflicted a barrage of attacks on government forces, killing and displacing many civilians in its wake. In May 2019, the armed 3R group attacked villagers in the northwest of the country, allegedly in retaliation for the death of a member of a Muslim ethnic minority group,¹⁰ and three commanders are now awaiting trial.¹¹ The group has continued to proliferate in Mambéré-Kadéï, Nana-Mambéré and Ouham-Pendé prefectures. However, Russian elements are said to have pushed this group out of towns such as Bouar, with some crossing the border to Cameroon. This has not stopped the group's illegal taxation of economic activities, especially from mining, which it uses to fund its operations.¹²

At the same time, the UN Panel of Experts has confirmed that Russian instructors, accompanied by Central African Armed Forces (*Forces Armées Centrafricaines*, or FACA) soldiers, shot two Fulani civilians in Ouaka Prefecture in March 2020. A large number of reported killings targeting Fulani triggered UPC and 3R narratives on the need for protection, and local communities have expressed fear of generalisations made by Russian operatives, such as linking all Fulani to the UPC or being anti-balaka.¹³

In December 2020, a loose coalition of armed groups was formed, known as the Coalition des Patriotes pour le Changement (CPC), and composed of the strongest armed groups in the country – the Mouvement Patriotique pour la Centrafrique (MPC), FPRC, 3R, UPC and two anti-balaka branches. The different groups were convinced by former president François Bozizé that a change of power would advance their agendas and attempted to overthrow Touadéra upon his presidential appointment but were subsequently pushed back by the FACA and Russian military.¹⁴ The CPC is therefore made up of groups that, other than the overthrow of the government, have differing aims and objectives.

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While the crisis is often pitted as an interfaith conflict, neither the Séléka nor the anti-balaka attributes their actions to religious beliefs and neither is supported by a religious leader or institution. Rather, the conflict has been described as 'a culture of predation in Central African society as an imitation of a State whose progressive collapse has left the way open to the actions of armed groups'.¹⁵ As such, religion is manipulated by elites to achieve political and economic goals, to obtain natural resources or for personal gain.¹⁶ In addition, it has been asserted that the targeting of Muslim communities in 2014 was in fact ethnically based because some communities were untouched.¹⁷ Moreover, clashes in 2017 contributed towards splitting the anti-balaka movements because the Yokoma-dominated faction refused to participate, and Bouar's Ndalé anti-balaka are now said to be rebranding themselves as anti-foreigner as opposed to anti-balaka.¹⁸ The UN Panel of Experts on CAR has also described the conflict as occurring along ethnic lines, while overlapping with religious beliefs. On the 3R group, Human Rights watch has noted that, 'As with the rest of the crisis, things do not fit into neat categories. Based on our research, 3R's claim to be protecting Muslims is a pretext. They seem to be a Cameroonian or Central African group whose real goal is to profit from the crisis.'¹⁹ Interestingly, in 2019, research in Bossangoa and on the CAR–Cameroon border zone revealed that people saw banditry, crime and 'young people' as the biggest threats.²⁰

Even so, building the capacity for communities to practise religious tolerance can go a long way in preventing the allure of extremist groups. CAR's constitution allows for freedom of religion and equal protection under the law and religious intolerance is prohibited. In July 2019, a tripartite agreement was signed between the UN and Cameroon for the voluntary repatriation of 250 000 predominantly Muslim refugees, suggesting some positive movements towards reintegration of these refugees. Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha have now been adopted as national holidays and there are a number of efforts to promote interfaith dialogue, including the Platform for Religious Confessions in Central Africa (*Plateforme des Confessions Religieuses de Centrafrique*, or PCRC) and Radio Sewa FM.²¹

Nevertheless, killings on the basis of religious affiliation have continued.²² Religious and ethnic minorities, such as Muslims and Fulanis, continue to be stigmatised and targeted by national defence forces and other security personnel on suspicion of colluding with armed groups.²³ The December 2020 general election process posed challenges for religious minorities. Muslims also continue to report social discrimination and marginalisation and remain underrepresented across all public spheres. In addition, hate speech is still prevalent in traditional and social media outfits. There are also reports of Muslims being subjected to arbitrary and long pre-trial detentions, which undermines their human rights.²⁴

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Should these religious tensions continue to be exploited, CAR could be at high risk of the influence of violent extremism spreading from extremist groups operating in neighbouring countries. The next section examines the state of extremism in the region.

The state of extremism in the region

CAR's geographical location next to countries such as Cameroon and Chad, which face ongoing challenges from terrorism, could be a catalytic factor for the emergence of violent extremism, should extremists in

these countries decide to expand their operations. Parts of CAR could serve as geographical safe havens due to low levels of state presence in those areas or could be used to gather revenue from illicit financial flows. Low levels of development and unemployment can also make young people in CAR susceptible to recruitment. In addition, CAR can be seen as having an accessible environment and strategic points of entry through specific communities.²⁵

Boko Haram, formally known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS), operates in CAR's neighbouring countries, namely Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon. According to the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), it is the second deadliest terrorist group in the world, and the worst in sub-Saharan Africa, having recorded a surge in terrorist activity in 2019.²⁶ In 2016, the group splintered due to internal tensions, leading to the formation of Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). ISWAP has continued to grow and recently, due to the death of the long-time leader of JAS, Abubakar Shekau in May 2021, has been able to consolidate its presence in the region and reconfigure its operations, while gaining territory, fighters and weapons.²⁷ This is because of returning fighters who had left after the split, being disillusioned by the selfishness of the leaders of the JAS and ISWAP factions. ISWAP is said to use networks and contacts across West and North Africa (Libya, Algeria, Mali, Niger and Nigeria) to facilitate the movements of fighters.²⁸ Shekau's death has resulted in large-scale desertions in Nigeria but has not led to the same in Niger or Chad.

There has been an international aspect to the national violence and intercommunal tensions in CAR, with several players previously calling for solidarity with the Peul. In 2014, it was alleged that Séléka began carrying out kidnappings in Cameroon, with militants inscribing 'Bocouharam [Boko Haram]' on their uniforms. The Séléka are also thought to have played a role in transferring Boko Haram's kidnapped girls from Chibok, Nigeria, to CAR. Moreover, there have been allegations of Boko Haram leaders training Séléka militants in Niger and Cameroon.²⁹ In addition, General Baba Laddé, a former Peul militia from Chad who subsequently reconciled with the late Chadian president Idriss Déby Itno and became head of intelligence in Chad in 2021,³⁰ has previously stated ambitions to unite Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Peul, the Tuareg (Berber-speaking pastoralists who inhabit large parts of the Sahara) and the Polisario (a nationalist organisation advocating for the independence of the Western Sahara).³¹ Finally, Ali

Darassa, Nigerian leader of the UPC and former right-hand man of Laddé, is alleged to have links to Boko Haram, which could be further exploited in the future.³²

It has been observed that support for ISWAP (and the Islamic State's Central Africa Province [ISCAP] operating in Mozambique and along the east coast of Africa) has emerged from 'minority ethnolinguistic groups (Kanuris, Fulanis, and Swahili dialect-speakers) that:

1. tend to be distant from national capitals and marginalized from political, economic, and cultural power;
2. have kin across transnational borders whom they may identify with more than compatriots in other parts of their countries; and
3. received theological influences from Wahhabist and "puritanical" apolitical groups like Tablighi Jamaat that disrupted religious harmony'.³³

It is therefore possible that ISWAP may continue to try to exploit similar tensions in other parts of the continent.

However, the International Crisis Group (ICG) posits a slightly different thesis, noting that in Cameroon,

*Traditional Sufi Islam is increasingly challenged by the rise of more rigorist Islamic ideology, mostly Wahhabism. The current transformation is mainly promoted by young Cameroonian Muslims from the South, whereas the Sufi Islam of the North, dominated by the Fulani, seems on the decline. These southern youths speak Arabic, are often educated in Sudan and the Gulf countries, and are opposed both to Fulani control of the Muslim community and to the ageing religious establishment.*³⁴

There are now reports that many of the armed groups include foreign fighters, including Muslims from Chad, Cameroon and South Sudan. This is said to have increased religious and ethnic tensions.³⁵

While these allegations may be true, representatives of the authorities in Cameroon, Chad and Sudan have lamented to the UN Panel of Experts that there are continued narratives which portray the government as responsible for the crisis in CAR. Instead, these countries have stressed their efforts to stop armed groups operating in CAR from establishing bases on their territories and highlighted their efforts at border control, while pointing to the limited capabilities of the FACA.³⁶

The tensions between CAR and its neighbours have persisted. In May 2021, Chad accused CAR of committing war crimes after Chadian troops were attacked not far from the border.³⁷ This raises questions over the effectiveness of the cooperation between CAR and its neighbours. Furthermore, Déby Itno's death in April 2021 after 30 years of rule could leave a vacuum in the region as the country faces internal challenges. Chad has a strong army and has been a strong supporter of French operation Barkane, aimed at fighting jihadist groups in the Sahel. It has played an important role in the G5 Sahel, but also in dislodging Boko Haram from Nigeria. Chad has also contributed to CAR's UN operation MINUSCA but was accused of being partial to the Muslim population and of human rights abuses.³⁸ Thus, more could be done to promote cross-border dialogue and cooperation. In this instance, regional organisations such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) could play an important facilitator role.

Driving factors for extremism emerging in CAR

From the outset, it is important to note that the armed groups in CAR have used extreme and violent armed tactics for decades, as was witnessed in the exchanges between the Séléka and anti-balaka armed groups in 2013. The bigger question, however, is whether these divisions can also be exploited for the wider agenda of organisations that seek to advance global jihad in Africa. A number of factors, examined below, make this possible.

Inclusive economic development

Many economic factors make CAR prone to extremism. According to figures published by the World Bank, in 2020, approximately 71% of the population of CAR lived under the poverty line. The country also has one of the lowest education and gender equality indicators in the world.³⁹ Youth unemployment is high, which is a concern as it is strongly associated with the potential to join armed groups and conflicts.⁴⁰ In addition, the country is rich in resources. The exploitation of resources by the political elite, dating back to French colonial times, has also perpetuated a sense of relative deprivation among the general population.⁴¹

The Corruption Perceptions Index ranks CAR as one of the most corrupt countries in the world (146 out of 180 on the Index).⁴² CAR scores 107 out of 120 in the State Fragility Index, ranking 6th in 2021 out of 179 countries

(where 1 is most fragile).⁴³ In the State Fragility Index, CAR scores poorly across the variety of economic, social, cohesion, political and social indicators. For example, it scores 9.6 (out of 10) on economic inclusion, 9.7 for factionalised elites, 10 for public services, 9.3 for human rights, 9 for state legitimacy and 8.9 for demographic pressures. These are all known to be driving factors of violent extremism.

Furthermore, informal and illicit trade in CAR is rife. On the CAR–Cameroon side of the border, small-scale gold and diamond mining activities are common.⁴⁴ Currently, mining activities are largely untaxed and uncontrolled by the government. Illegal trafficking into Cameroon and through to CAR is common and Interpol has described in detail how the armed groups profit from taxation of the trade.⁴⁵ This ‘economy of the conflict’ in the border region between the two countries may potentially attract international terrorist groups from neighbouring Cameroon to CAR. Based on their observations, locals in Bouar are convinced that ‘foreign elements’ are already active in the illicit trade in gold and diamonds.⁴⁶ The government is now preparing new legislation that will shift income from these mining activities to government circles, according to field research conducted.⁴⁷ This may have an impact on the economy of the conflict since the income-generating activity on which the armed groups in that region live will dry up. There is no reason to assume that the government profit from mining will flow back into the communities and the impact on the conflict dynamics of this potential shift is yet to be seen.

Absence of state structures and safety and security

Years of lawlessness and a diversity of armed groups that control the roads and villages outside of the capital have meant that insecurity in CAR persists. Joining a violent gang or armed group is one way to ensure protection. This protection guarantee is a tactic used by terrorist organisations in West Africa and may very well also work in CAR. Armed groups such as the 3R operate freely between the porous border areas of Cameroon, Chad and CAR, meaning that foreign elements could easily enter the country.

During the field research, sources pointed to the use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) by 3R as an indication that terrorist groups from neighbouring Cameroon had infiltrated CAR to share their knowledge and technical expertise in the run-up to elections.⁴⁸ At the same time, there are indications that the 3R movement has received assistance from

what was described to the UN Panel of Experts as ‘Chadian military’ to re-arm in key border towns, while using multiple border routes along the borders of Cameroon and Chad, which could offer an alternative explanation for the use of these devices.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, it raises the question of the continuing prevalence and persistence of violent extremism.

Moreover, state security is largely absent and, where it exists, negative encounters with the FACA or law enforcement are common.⁵⁰ As noted, Russian agents have been implicated in the violence against the Peul and there have been instances of humiliation and torture, which could be used to mobilise extremists. Harassment by government officials and security personnel of a variety of backgrounds is routine. According to stakeholders, youth have been mobilised by the Ministry of Youth and Sport to report on their Muslim peers – something that could lead to large-scale violence against the Muslim population of CAR.⁵¹ The United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) ground-breaking report *Journey to Extremism in Africa* shows that more than 70% of new recruits take the step to join a violent extremist group in the African context on the basis of a trigger event, namely a negative encounter with a representative of the state.⁵² It is therefore critical that government adopts a zero-tolerance attitude to human rights violations to prevent radicalisation.

Religious and ethnic marginalisation

During the course of research, there were allegations that the Peul minority is being targeted through the mobilisation of a youth force and the internationalisation of a local agenda, in a way that is reminiscent of the 2013 scenario between the Séléka and anti-balaka armed groups.⁵³ Perceptions of marginalisation and victimisation among the Muslim minority in CAR are strong, with many grievances against government representatives. The Muslim population in CAR is often referred to as ‘foreigners’,⁵⁴ and the Peul often use fake Christian names in formal contacts with government representatives to avoid harassment or worse.⁵⁵

Moreover, there are perceptions that the political arena in Bangui is dominated by French-speaking elites that are educated in Western universities, a layer in society that is almost impermeable for the Peul because of their image, lifestyle and choices in the area of education. As in many other West African countries, the education of the Muslim population is often done in Koranic schools that do not prepare for positions in government circles.⁵⁶ One element

highlighted during discussions in Bangui is that families that recently returned to their homes in the Muslim quarters found their houses and plots of land occupied by non-Muslims. People complain that there are no adequate procedures in place to guarantee that the original land- and home-owners or occupants can claim back their property.⁵⁷

In CAR, there is a tendency to instrumentalise or politicise religion, although a strong official narrative denies this. Nevertheless, the UN Human Rights Office, MINUSCA, the UNDP and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict (OSRSG-SVC) have mapped all violations in CAR between 2003 and 2015 into a nearly 400-page document, noting that

*The presence of foreign nationals within Séléka (whose members were predominantly Muslim) and their leaders' multiple networks in neighbouring countries, particularly in Chad and the Sudan, resulted in wider questioning of the citizenship and loyalty to the country of Muslims who are nationals of the Central African Republic. While non-nationals were always historically a part of the Muslim community, the violence of the latest conflict resulted in all Muslims (Central Africans and non-nationals) being branded as close to the Séléka rebellion, and therefore targeted by extreme reprisal violence.*⁵⁸

In addition, it has been argued that the violence that erupted in 2013 allowed religious entrepreneurs and specific pastors to claim authority and climb CAR's social ladder, and that these positions could potentially allow them to manipulate religious divides in the future.⁵⁹ As noted, field research revealed reports that youth are mobilised by politicians to keep an eye on and report young Muslims.⁶⁰

Conversely, many of the local imams are closely related and have been 'trained' in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. One of the stakeholders interviewed explained that 'one cannot be a respected imam in CAR if you have not studied in Saudi Arabia'.⁶¹ Local imams indicate that Pakistani Ahmadiyya have entered the Bangui environment and that political Islam or Salafism (fundamentalists that believe in the original political and moral practices of Islam) is common in CAR.⁶² This has the potential to be manipulated by violent extremist groups – for example, Al-Qaeda follows a strain of Salafi-Jihadi Salafism, while Islamic State (ISIS) promotes a Salafi-Takfiri strain.⁶³ There were also

reports that food, money and clothes were being offered to locals for attending specific mosques and that assistance was being sought for rebuilding the mosque in Miskin, where anti-balaka militia killed 25 people in an attack in 2017.⁶⁴

It is also worth noting that a high degree of perceptions of exclusion and stigmatisation exists in the refugee population in Cameroon and Chad, as detailed in the International Centre for Transitional Justice's (ICTJ) 2018 report,⁶⁵ which could serve as a fertile ground for mobilisation and recruitment.

Youth mobilisation

It is estimated that 60% of CAR's population is under the age of 24.⁶⁶ This presents a significant risk that youth can be radicalised, as they are often unemployed and lack upward mobility. A UN report concluded that around the globe, jihadism is 'almost exclusively' associated with males 24 years and younger, and in regions experiencing a youth bulge.⁶⁷ The absence of state mechanisms within which the youth can engage makes them even more vulnerable to recruitment. Moreover, armed groups have, over the last decades, developed an effective recruitment strategy based on intergenerational tensions, which are present in many parts of West Africa that witness violent extremism.

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In recent years, some armed groups in CAR have produced strong leaders, which suggests that a charismatic leader could mobilise the youth under an ideological frame. For example, Harouna Douamba, an advisor to Touadéra, mobilised youth to oppose MINUSCA under a Pan African agenda through social media sites.⁶⁸ A pro-Touadéra militia called 'the sharks' resurfaced following Touadéra's election, with linkages to Héritier Doneng, responsible for communications by the Ministry of Youth and Sport.⁶⁹ In Nigeria, the execution of charismatic leader Mohammed Yusuf triggered a huge violent uprising and acted as a means of recruitment for Boko Haram.⁷⁰ The murder of Aboud Rogo, a radical Kenyan cleric, is also thought to have radicalised followers and inspired different actors across the region to rebel against authorities.⁷¹

Challenges to preventing violent extremism in CAR

It is apparent that all extremist warning signals in CAR are there. Stigmatisation and victimisation, along with inadequate governance, poverty, exclusion, the politicisation of religions and an influx of fundamentalist interpretations all provide opportunities for extremism. In addition, porous borders, an alienated refugee population and the internationalisation of the conflict may further propel the country in this direction.

Despite these challenges, field research found very little national expertise on the strategic approaches and modus operandi of Boko Haram and ISIS in the region. Some stakeholders in Bangui did not want to acknowledge the potential for extremism to take root, either out of a certain political correctness, since the terms 'radicalisation' and 'jihadis' have been used in the CAR in the past as a means to stigmatise the Peul population and to call for resistance, or out of misinterpretations of terms like 'violent extremism' and 'radicalisation'.⁷²

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Many people ignore the fact that the recruitment into Boko Haram and ISIS takes place on the basis of grievances and not primarily on the basis of religious narratives or ideology.⁷³ There is also a strong focus on the internal conflict dynamics within the borders of CAR, which is strengthened by an ever-present national narrative that claims there is no religious element to the conflict. However, conversations with representatives of Muslim communities in Bangui and Bouar disclose an alternative vision and version of the events.⁷⁴ A misreading of the relevance of religion and ideology in recruitment strategies is one of the obstacles preventing the development of a clear vision to prevent radicalisation, as well as mitigate against the potential external incursion of extremist violence.

Factors that could increase resilience against extremism

A key question is why extremism has not yet emerged in CAR on any significant level. Several factors could explain this. Firstly, there is a clear

language barrier. To be able to operate in Bouar or Bangui and stay under the radar one should preferably master the local and national languages of CAR. Outsiders have a major disadvantage in this respect that makes it difficult to penetrate the environment – one that is already crowded when it comes to armed groups. The 14 groups that are part of the 2019 Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the CAR each occupy their own space and sphere of influence, which does not necessarily allow for newcomers. These armed groups service certain interests, individuals and communities through means such as security and income. An outsider would have to come with a stronger and better proposition to convince recruits, and an operational approach that potentially defeats other armed groups that are well established.

The national language is more than just an obstacle for outsiders. It is also a symbol of national identity. Despite all the conflicts and disputes that have ravished the country, Central Africans take pride in their uniqueness. The fact that some of the opposing armed groups of the past have come together in the CPC, to form a united front against the government, is an indication that a national identity is developing. In addition, the pride that people take in the Bangui Forum of 2015 and the fact that all parties were represented to discuss the way forward for the nation in an inclusive national manner is a strength to be reckoned with. Although the follow-up to the Bangui Forum and the peace process has been challenging, it has also led to some concrete results and the inclusion of former warlords into the political arena. This has changed the position and interests of at least some of the players.

An array of NGOs in the different quarters of the cities and in rural communities have worked on conflict awareness through the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and National Reconciliation's Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees (LPRCs), to the extent that 'social cohesion' has become a buzzword in some corners of CAR. LPRCs work on the local level and intervene at an early stage when tensions arise. The quality of the LPRCs may differ, but generally investments in local peacebuilding have happened on a reasonably large scale. LPRCs are encouraged through the national PVE strategy to develop early warning systems and to build community resilience, but more can be done to support these efforts.⁷⁵

The other potentially helpful element that is part of the peace process is the restoration of justice and the attention that could be directed to victims through CAR's newly instituted Truth Commission (*Commission Vérité, Justice, Réparations et Réconciliation*, or CVJRR). This Commission has only recently started its work and has a long way to go given the reluctance to expose the perpetrators of violence, but if it gains traction it would certainly add to the level of resilience, since it would address the grievances and perceptions of impunity and potentially take away some of the drivers of violent extremism. It is also necessary for efforts to be made to promote inter-religious and intra-religious fora. In addition, the presence of MINUSCA also has the potential to build some level of societal resilience, since a high level of protective international military presence may deter newcomers. What does this mean for the future in CAR?

Potential scenarios

Over the last decades, terrorist organisations have proven to be flexible and adaptive in their approaches and tactics depending on the specifics of the context, the leadership preferences and their short-term and long-term local and international goals. These tactics, for instance in terms of target choice and recruitment strategies, change depending on local conditions and personalities, opportunities, availability or accessibility of resources and targets and in terms of their response to counter-terrorism measures.⁷⁶ There are several options and scenarios of how this could occur in the CAR situation, detailed below.

1. Terrorist groups from the region may try to infiltrate communities in CAR to create sleeper cells that prepare and execute attacks on FACA and other security actors as well as Russian instructors and the UN. This model was used by Boko Haram in Nigeria.⁷⁷
2. Terrorist groups from the region may exploit the alienation and anger among refugees from CAR in Cameroon and Chad to mobilise youth to either join the group for attacks in CAR or for operational activities elsewhere. For example, Palestinian refugees in Syria's Yarmouk camp were mobilised in the Syrian 'revolution' following an attack by the Islamic State.⁷⁸
3. Terrorist groups from the region could cooperate with armed groups such as 3R and the CPC to infuse their agenda into the local equation, frustrate

electoral processes in CAR and launch large-scale attacks. Such events were seen in Mali, where a Tuareg separatist group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (*Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad*, or MNLA), was backed by Islamist militant groups as early as 2012, enabling the group to gain control.⁷⁹

4. Terrorist groups from the region could profit from the illegal gold and diamond trade in and around CAR, infiltrate and cooperate with corrupt government officials and criminal gangs. This has been seen in Burkina Faso, where Islamist groups have targeted artisanal mines to generate funding.⁸⁰
5. Terrorist groups from the region could respond to Russian involvement in governmental protection and use this for propaganda purposes and to raise their battlefield image. In Mozambique, the Russian Wagner group was forced to withdraw after losing seven of their members and this was exploited by the insurgency.⁸¹
6. New groups and charismatic leaders may emerge that embrace a jihadi narrative to gain momentum and support among the new generation in CAR as an alternative to the 14 existing armed groups.

While this report has focused on the emergence of extremism in CAR, there is also the possibility of further and centrally orchestrated stigmatisation/targeting of Muslim/Peul communities, potentially leading to renewed open conflict. It is also possible that further intra- and inter-religious tensions between different interpretations of Islam and of Pentecostal or otherwise fundamentalist interpretations of Christianity lead to infighting in political circles to gain access and agency. The following section therefore makes recommendations to prevent the emergence of violent extremism in CAR.

Policy recommendations

The political and security situation both inside and in the vicinity of CAR is fragile. As this report has shown, similar tensions exist in the country now to those that began in 2012, which resulted in extensive fighting, violence against certain communities and massive levels of displacement. Often labelled as a Muslim/Christian interfaith conflict, the reality is much more complex, with religion and ethnicity being manipulated by various armed groups to serve their interests. Despite some moves to promote religious tolerance in CAR,

Muslims and Fulanis tend to be stigmatised by the FACA and other security armed forces, leading to a feeling of marginalisation.

CAR's geographical location makes it highly accessible for extremists, with porous borders and low state presence in parts of the country. Boko Haram and ISWAP (an offshoot of Boko Haram) operate in CAR's neighbouring countries – Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon – and there is some previous evidence that CAR's conflict has been internationalised by key players with extremist agendas. Cross-border tensions with some neighbouring countries such as Chad also limit the options for cooperation and dialogue on extremist issues.

Based on the findings of the field research, the conclusion is that there is a possibility for terrorist groups to introduce themselves into the CAR space. All of the drivers of extremism are present, and levels of resilience are insufficient to match the risks. This includes a lack of inclusive economic development, the absence of state structures and safety and security, religious and ethnic marginalisation and the mobilisation of youth. Although CAR has developed a national PVE strategy and appointed a National Committee for its implementation, the Committee lacks political, technical and financial support. More broadly, there is little awareness among the government or the population on what PVE entails.

Some factors could play a role in CAR's resilience, such as language barriers, an already contested space among armed groups, a sense of national identity among parts of the population, the use of LPRCs and the potential of the CVJRR. However, more needs to happen to make sure that CAR does not fall victim to the scenarios described in this report. In this regard, early warning is key.

As such the following recommendations are made:

To the government of CAR:

- Develop a better understanding of the tactics and operational choices of terrorist organisations, while also monitoring fundamentalist radicalisation and how these are affected by international trends.
- Provide political, technical and financial support to LPRCs and to the CVJRR to strengthen resilience and to promote reconciliation across the whole of CAR society.
- Support intra- and inter-religious dialogue and denounce stigmatisation and hate speech, including on social media and through radio.
- Strengthen the implementation of security sector reforms and DDR programmes to enhance the inclusion of armed groups in building peace and to raise their resilience from influence by foreign armed groups.
- Enhance cross-border cooperation with neighbours that have experience of working on violent extremism.

To the international community:

- Provide for PVE experts in the country to raise awareness on the threat of extremism in CAR and to strengthen the capacity of the National Committee for the implementation of the national PVE strategy to respond preventatively to conflict.
- Support the efforts of LPRCs and the CVJRR in building resilience by providing technical and financial assistance.
- Support the efforts of the government to promote intra- and inter-religious dialogue.
- Advocate for a zero-tolerance approach to human rights abuses committed by the FACA and by Russian operatives and strengthen training on human rights issues.
- Support cross-border dialogues and cross-border cooperation on extremism, such as through the AU and ECCAS.

Acronyms and abbreviations

3R	Return, Reclamation and Rehabilitation Movement
AU	African Union
CAR	Central African Republic
CPC	<i>Coalition des Patriotes pour le Changement</i>
CVJRR	<i>Commission Vérité, Justice, Réparations et Réconciliation</i>
DDR	Demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central African States
FACA	<i>Forces Armées Centrafricaines</i>
ICG	International Crisis Group
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
FPRC	<i>Front Populaire pour la Renaissance de Centrafrique</i>
ICTJ	International Centre for Transitional Justice
IEP	Institute for Economics and Peace
IJR	Institute for Justice and Reconciliation
ISCAP	Islamic State's Central Africa Province
ISWAP	Islamic State's West Africa Province
JAS	Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad
LPRC	Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees
MINUSCA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
MNLA	<i>Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad</i>
MPC	<i>Mouvement Patriotique pour la Centrafrique</i>
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OSRSG-SVC	Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict
PCRC	<i>Plateforme des Confessions Religieuses de Centrafrique</i>
PVE	Preventing violent extremism
SNPREV	<i>Stratégie Nationale de Prévention de la Radicalisation et de l'Extrémisme Violent</i>
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UPC	<i>Union pour la Centrafrique</i>

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