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CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: THE
INVENTION OF A RELIGIOUS
CONFLICT

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Abstract:

The present crisis that began in 2012 in Central African Republic (CAR), triggered by Seleka rebellion and perpetuated by the Antibalaka militia, is often presented in the mass media as an interfaith conflict instead of a political power struggle included in the regional background of Chad and Darfur conflicts. This theory ignores that, in CAR, religion and, more broadly, national identity, have been manipulated by elites behind these two armed groups to further political and economic goals, basically to attain or maintain power, to take control over natural resources and to achieve personal gain. This manipulation has been possible due to the failure of State in CAR.

Keywords:

Seleka, Antibalaka, crisis, CAR, failed State, Central African Republic, interfaith conflict, Darfur, Chad.

* **NOTE:** The ideas contained in the *Opinion Papers* are the responsibility of their authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

INTRODUCTION

The Central African Republic (CAR) has lived in a “silent agony”¹ since its independence from France in 1960, due to lack of large-scale massacres and famines that get media’s attention and its context of warring neighbours like DRC and Sudan. Many Westerners put the former colonial territory of Oubangui-Chari in its place only in December 2012, when Seleka² alliance triggered an offensive on the capital that left behind a scorched earth of murders, rapes and looting³. Less than a month it was enough for the rebel coalition to arrive to the gates of Bangui and force former President François Bozizé, who himself seized power with a *coup d’état* in 2003, to sign a peace agreement that obliged him to cohabit with Seleka⁴. This agreement was short-lived and on 24 March 2013, this armed group, whose members are mostly Muslims, overthrew Bozizé. One of its leaders, Michel Djotodia, was immediately proclaimed President.

However, power did not soothe Seleka’s criminal impulses and its members continued killing and stealing. When massacres and exodus of hundreds of thousands of Central Africans erased CAR from the label of “low intensity conflict”, international community became definitely involved in the future of the country. On 10 January, President Djotodia resigned, forced by regional and French pressure. Later the same month, a new transitional government was appointed. This government now faces the difficult task to organize credible elections within February 2015.

It will not be easy, because the seed of hatred has taken root. Even before Djotodia’s resignation and forced quartering of Seleka forces in Bangui⁵, another militia, the Antibalaka, had initiated attacks on civilians. Its target was the Muslim minority that they considered as accomplices of the antagonistic armed group. This conflict has perpetuated a vicious cycle of violence that the 2,000 soldiers of the French military operation “Sangaris”, nor the 5,000⁶ African troops of MISCA have been able to stop. These military operations are now being reinforced with the deployment of the European Union military mission in Central Africa,

¹ MUNIE Vincent. "Centrafrique, l'agonie silencieuse". Le Monde Diplomatique, October 2013, p.12. <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2013/10/MUNIE/49687>

² Seleka means "alliance" in the national vehicular language, Sango.

³ Among all the author’s interviews with residents of the capital in April and May 2014, there was none where the respondent claimed to have been spared of violence. It is rare to find someone whose family has not deplored fatalities. The number of people who have lost their homes, often looted and then destroyed with hand grenades is also very high but difficult to quantify because there are no statistics. However, simple observation shows how entire blocks of Bangui neighbourhoods have been flattened. The number of displaced people in the capital testifies of the level of destruction. From the estimated 557,000 displaced censused by the United Nations, about 132,000 are in Bangui. While many of them do not return to their homes for fear, many others no longer have homes to return to.

⁴ With Seleka in Damara, just outside Bangui, Bozizé and Seleka leaders signed, on 11 January 2013, a peace agreement in Libreville (Gabon) sponsored by the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). This agreement established a national unity government and states that elections should be held within 12 months.

⁵ Up to 4,000 members of Seleka are still quartered in the capital in June 2014.

⁶ Both the African-led International Support Mission to the Central African Republic (MISCA in its French acronym) and the Sangaris French operation, designed to support the first, were authorized by the Security Council of the UN resolution 2127 (2013). [http://www.un.org/es/comun/docs/?symbol=S/RES/2127\(2013\)](http://www.un.org/es/comun/docs/?symbol=S/RES/2127(2013))

EUFOR RCA, consisting of about a 1.000 soldiers, in which Spain is leading the Special Operations Command⁷.

As a result of the action of Seleka and Antibalaka, the two main armed groups⁸ in the country, Central Africans are suffering the worst crisis since CAR independence. That's saying a lot for a country that had suffered five coups d'état and that is one of the world's poorest nations. CAR was ranked 180 of 186⁹ States, according to the United Nations Program for Development (UNDP). The country figures as a failed states in The Fund for Peace index¹⁰.

One aspect of the conflict is attracting growing attention: the religious bias of attacks against civilians, a factor that is described as one of the causes of the crisis rather than as a result of a conflict of complex implications. The recurrent attacks by Seleka against Christians, and by Antibalaka against Muslims support this theory. Both groups are often defined as "Muslim alliance" and "Christian militias", respectively, ignoring the fact that their actions are not due to religious beliefs, no leader or religious institution has supported them, and their goals seem to aim mainly to maintaining or attaining power and personal gain. The roots of the current tragedy in CAR should not refer to religious factors, but to the establishment of 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.

Seleka and Antibalaka have seen in this religious bias an opportunity to use the "exploitation of religious differences"¹¹, to present themselves as defenders of Muslims and Christians communities and to use enemy's crimes to justify their own atrocities.

THE ROOTS OF CONFLICT

1.1 Historical background of religious differences

The Central African people "is divided into dozens of ethnic groups"¹², ranging from a million of people of Gbaya ethnic group to about 26,000 pygmies¹³. The UN estimates that 80% of Central Africans are Christians (51% Protestants and 29% Catholics), 10% Muslims and 10%, animist. However, according to this saying: "In Central African Republic there are 70% of

⁷ A contingent of fifty soldiers of the Special Operations Group "Maderal Oleaga" XIX and 25 agents of the Rapid Reaction Group (Guardia Civil) are in the country since late May.

⁸ Central African authorities do not consider Antibalaka as an "armed group" but as a militia, but we have used this denomination for effectiveness. Alongside Seleka and Antibalaka coexist other armed groups in CAR, including the Joseph Kony's LRA, in the southeast of the country.

⁹ http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/14/hdr2013_en_complete.pdf

¹⁰ The Fund for Peace. The Failed States Index Rankings. <http://ffp.statesindex.org/rankings>

¹¹ GOURDIN Patrice, « Centrafrique: la fabrication d'un choc des civilisations », Études Géostratégiques (26.1.2014) <http://etudesgeostrategiques.com/2014/01/26/centrafrique-la-fabrication-dun-choc-des-civilisations/>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ According to the figures of Italian NGO COOPI. This organisation has managed for years a development project with this indigenous people

Christian, 15% of Muslim and 100% of animist"¹⁴, those figures are doubtful. This sentence refers to syncretism that characterizes monotheistic religions in Africa, whose adherents practice their respective faiths without thereby waiving the traditional beliefs of the continent¹⁵, an aspect that contributes to tolerance.

Until the end of 2012, communities mostly coexisted peacefully, mixed marriages were common and religious practices relaxed. Nevertheless, this coexistence "is not decisive when it comes to addressing the deep historical and sociological roots of the mistrust between communities"¹⁶. These roots actually are stretched back to the disruption of the original economic structure of CAR, first by the slave trade and then by colonialism. "As in many non-industrialized countries, people try to make the best of possible resources available (...) this results in different ways of life: sedentary farmers and nomadic herders and traders and merchants. Most communities are specialized in certain activities. Hence such ethnic and / or religious affiliation is or has been associated with a particular activity (...) these factors generate approaches and tensions. Here, again, we find that religious affiliation does not appear decisive".¹⁷

Before the arrival of French, the north and the east of the country were under slave trade practiced by Arab tribes and by "small political entities founded by traffickers from local clans and converted to Islam. The integration of the region into the European slave trade and catch (...) by farmers of the Peul ethnic group caused that mostly of non-Muslim populations of Central Africa suffered slavery. This pain remains present (...) and therefore northern Muslims are unloved".¹⁸

Colonialism catalysed these tensions to eradicate local economic structure in order to "finance the colonial project"¹⁹ through the elimination of the subsistence economy, which was replaced by compulsory crops and the implementation of a policy of semi-slavery which imposed forced labour as porters to autochthons. Moreover, colonial power favoured certain ethnic groups according to its interests. In CAR, the priority was given to Muslim pastoralists peul mbororo. From 1931, France assigned farmland in Bouar region (west) to peul to graze their herds. Farmers of Gbaya ethnic group (29% of the current population of the CAR) reacted accusing peuls of having despoiled their lands. This confrontation worsened the already battered image associated with Muslims. But the origins of this resentment were not religious, but economic. One of the keys to understand the conflict in the Central African society should be seek in the control of natural resources.

¹⁴ Quoted by MALAGARDIS Maria. « Du chaos politique à l'embrassement confessionnel ». Libération (22.11.2013)

¹⁵ KABUNDA Mbuyi, «De la Especificidad cultural al sincretismo confesional y el mestizaje», en KABUNDA Mbuyi y SANTAMARÍA Antonio, Mitos y realidades del África Subsahariana, Madrid, Catarata y Casa África, 2009, 48.

¹⁶ MARTINELLI Bruno, « Les chemins de la haine », Mondafrique, (19.5.2014)

<http://mondafrique.com/lire/politique/2014/05/19/centrafrique-sur-les-chemins-de-la-haine>

¹⁷ GOURDIN, op. cit.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ GOUGA Jeannot Christophe III, «Crise et mutations sociale en Centrafrique», Brazzaville, Les éditions Hemar, 2007, 39.

"The dynamics of the colonial system imposed a radical change at the end of which the violence became structural while, at the same time, the foundations of underdevelopment was being settled up"²⁰. Since then, these dynamics have been perpetuated by the systematic predation of the State by CAR leaders. The penultimate of them, was the president François Bozizé, whose priority was to place his clansmen in key institutions such as the Ministry of Mines²¹, in order to seize benefits from trade of gold and diamonds.

1.2. The confusion between Muslims civilians and actors of the armed conflict

The bad reputation of Muslims led them to a progressive marginalisation. The Vakaga region in the northeast of the country, the stronghold of Seleka alliance, is an enclave stigmatized by its Islamic religion and by the enslaving past of its inhabitants. This population was forgotten by the state, which for decades has left them outside their meagre investment, therefore its citizen maintained close ties with Chad and Sudan. The institutional slovenliness, the cultural proximity to countries in conflict, the porous borders and the abundance of mercenaries settled down in this region allowed the armed groups to operate freely. At the same time, the detachment of this population to Central Africans from the South of the country only increased.

Muslims, though much more numerous in the north, were distributed across the country until late 2013. Nevertheless, in recent years, the resentment toward this minority²² has resulted in occasional clashes that set a precedent²³ for what happened now. The discourse about this community has also acquired an alienating feature: the consideration of any Muslim as a "foreign". Consequently, they have been stripped of their national identity²⁴. This trend has gone hand in hand with the assimilation of these Central Africans with one of the most terrible actors of country's successive conflicts: Chadian and Sudanese mercenaries²⁵.

²⁰ Ibid, 41

²¹ The ministry was his nephew, Sylvain Ndotingai, who promoted the adoption of a set of laws to control this trade which hurt Muslims diamond dealers. France, according to Le Monde, estimates that Bozize's personal fortune is at least of 156 million euros, spread over different countries, including several tax havens.

²² An example of the economic origins of this resentment is observed in the city of Boda, where 11,000 Muslims live besieged by Antibalaka members, at the time of writing this article. Eric Valory, commander of the French operation "Sangaris" in the area, argues that Christians blamed wealthy Muslims, who owned almost all businesses in the city, of exploiting them by paying low wages. Notable Muslims of the city, including the mayor, Aouat Mahamat, claim that before the siege of Islamic sector some Christians had divided Muslim's houses between them. Interviews with the author, April 2014.

²³ The discovery of the bodies of two children in the Chadian trader's car triggered a wave of violence in the PK5 neighbourhood of Bangui in May 2011. A mosque was attacked and several Muslims were killed. Then, the violence spread to all the Muslim neighbourhoods of the city. The retaliation came in the form of an assault on a Catholic church. This outbreak of violence was controlled after one week. Quoted by MARTINELLI, op. cit.

²⁴ This stripping of the Muslim's Central Africans identity has reached even the CAR nationals converted to Islam in their adult life. This was the case of a man killed by the Antibalaka in PK5 neighbourhood on grounds that he was a "foreigner". Author's interviews with PK5 Muslim neighbours, April 2014.

²⁵ With the approval of their states, mainly Chad, whose interference in CAR politics has been constant. After

The confusion between Muslim civilians, mercenaries and members of Seleka was catalysed at the dawn of the crisis by the highest State institution. In December 2012 President Bozizé started throwing the spectre of religious hatred in their statements. The head of the State cared little about the fact that his coup d'état, with which he overthrew Ange-Félix Patassé in 2003, succeeded thanks to Chadian mercenaries. Almost ten years later, with his power under serious threat, Bozizé, in a remarkable exercise in populism, incorporates into his argumentation "a geopolitical representation unused until then: the confessional nature of the conflict arguing that Christian communities were being threatened by Muslims"²⁶.

Other members of his government then alluded to a supposed "Wahhabi" Seleka funding and to the presence of elements of Boko Haram in Seleka, accusations probably intended to provoke Western intervention in order to preserve Bozizé's power.

The bad reputation of the Muslims, the atrocities committed by Seleka²⁷ and the "indoctrination" of part of the population by Bozizé laid the foundations for the current "artificial confessional rupture"²⁸.

1. Seleka: a vast "operation of banditry"

1.1. Composition and leaders of the rebel alliance

The best argument to support the artificial character of this "fracture" lies in the nature, the ideological poverty and the opportunism showed by both Seleka and Antibalaka. In the genesis of the first armed group, we find five armed groups composed of warlords, mercenaries, poachers, bandits, as well as former members of the apparatus of the State power, including several former Bozizé's senior Government officials. Djotodia himself, before becoming the leader of one of these bands, the UFDR (Union of Democratic Forces for Unity, in its French acronym), was consul²⁹ in Nyala, the capital of South Darfur.

Alongside with the UFDR, at least four other armed groups joined the new alliance: the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace (CPJP), the Democratic Front of the Central African People (FDPC), and two newly created groups, the Patriotic Convention for Saving

deserting his former ally Bozizé, is likely N'Djamena has supported Seleka alliance, whose leadership includes several Chadian individuals.

²⁶ GOURDIN, op. cit.

²⁷ Central African Christians often accuse Muslims of complicity with Seleka for having hosted his henchmen at home or bought what they had stolen.

²⁸ According to former Prime Minister Martin Ziguéle.

<http://mondafrique.com/lire/international/2014/06/09/centrafrique-pour-ziguele-la-fracture-confessionnelle-est-artificielle>

²⁹ Information on the leaders of the five armed groups comes from various articles and analysis, especially DONOSIO Hyppolite, "Pour qui roule the Seleka?" Radio France Internationale (RFI), (29.12.2012) In <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20121229-centrafrique-roule-seleka-bozize-faca-cpjp/>

the Country (CPSK) and the Alliance for Revival and Rebuilding (A2R). The latter brought together officials from Central African Armed Forces (FACA) "hostile to the regime"³⁰.

Seleka number two was "general"³¹ Nouredine Adam, a CPJP leader, who later would head the dreadful Djotodia's political police. Adam, formed in special operations in Israel, is considered the brain of the rebel alliance toughest wing that executed the coup of March 2013. He is also seen as the man of Chad in Seleka and the promoter of the secessionist project of the CAR northern regions. Regarding FDPC, its leader was none other than the Chadian lord of war Martin Koumtamadj³², known as Abdoulaye Miskine. Also Miskine has been in the past a Patassé's senior official. At the top of CPJC, we find even a former minister, Charles Massi, a military doctor, head of CPJC political wing, probably killed by Bozizé in 2010. His son, Eric Neris Massi, was Seleka spokesman and remains one of its visible faces.

Concerning CPSK, founded in June 2012, its leader was "general" Mohamed Moussa Dhaffane, who now is presenting himself as "acting president" of the rebel alliance³³, a position not recognized by many of the other leaders of Seleka.

In the press statement of 12 December 2012 where Seleka announced the establishment of the alliance, its leaders alleged violations of the terms of the military agreements signed in 2008 with Bozizé's Government, as well as the "spoliation of property", the "bad government"³⁴ and the marginalisation of the northern regions. In these regions, Vakaga, Bamingui-Bangoran and Haut-Kotto, these armed groups had been the lords for years, thanks to the absence of the State and the weakness of the Armed Forces, which had maximum 5,000 poorly armed troops³⁵. This foundational statement showed how the rebel alliance "lacked structured nor conceptualized political line, clear ideology and had no specific demands".³⁶

Members of Seleka were united "less by religion than by grievance against President Bozizé and the promise of opportunity of personal enrichment through looting"³⁷. The weak group claims were further blurred as the rebel alliance progressed towards Bangui as a result of the

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Most of Seleka leaders, as Adam and Dhaffane, proclaimed themselves "General"; hence the use of quotation marks.

³² Now, he is the leader of a splinter rebel group of Seleka.

³³ Interview with author. On 21 May 2014.

³⁴ CIDOB, Michel Djotodia's biography.

http://www.cidob.org/es/documentacion/biografias_lideres_politicos/afrika/republica_centroafricana/michel_djotodia

³⁵ DÍEZ ALCALDE Jesús. «Caos y violencia en la República Centroafricana, y la reacción internacional». Analysis Document 05/2014, IEEE (22.1.2014)

http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2014/DIEEEA05-2014_Caos_RCA_JDA.pdf

³⁶ LAMESSI Alain, «Le Séléka : un mal nécessaire pour une sortie rapide de crise en Centrafrique ? » Centrafrique-presse.com (27.12.2012) <http://centrafrique-presse.over-blog.com/article-le-seleka-un-mal-necessaire-pour-une-sortie-de-crise-rapide-en-republique-centrafricaine-par-a-113825642.html>

³⁷ AGGER Kasper. «Behind The Headlines. Drivers on violence on Central African Republic», The Enough Project, mayo de 2014. <http://enoughproject.org/reports/behind-headlines-drivers-violence-central-african-republic>

recruitment of thousands of young people³⁸ without hopes for the future (Seleka departed from northern CAR with about 5,000 men and arrived to Bangui with 20,000). These young people, who was promised a future addition to the FACA³⁹, were not in all cases Muslims and often murdered under the effects of Tramadol, an opiate drug. In December 2013, "the Seleka had become a vast operation of banditry (...) a cloud of fighters from different movements, with no command structure, no ideology and with one goal: to overthrow Bozizé and benefit as a result⁴⁰".

1.2. Mercenaries and regional conflict system

In the Seleka military operation, a foreign actor played a crucial role: the Sudanese and Chadian mercenaries, due to its good military training and sophisticated weaponry that came mainly from their warring countries. The inclusion of these soldiers of fortune, who were available after the end of the war in Darfur, is considered one of the factors that precipitated the Seleka offensive. According to this hypothesis, this crisis is a new manifestation of the "regional conflict system"⁴¹ which includes CAR, Sudan and Chad.

For Seleka it was easy to convince these professional murderers to join the alliance. Djotodia contacts in Darfur and coalition's ties with Chad opened the door to 2,000 mercenaries. Among these, 700 belonged to the Janjaweed militias⁴². Their commander was another warlord, Moussa Asimeh, a former colonel of the Sudanese army, who is accused of several massacres in Darfur. Asimeh is the subject of an arrest warrant by the International Criminal Court.

Individuals like Assimeh could be employed thanks to the control of natural resources in the area under Seleka domination. The most important of these resources were gold and diamond mines, and the poaching of elephants for ivory⁴³. Poachers and mercenaries were, in some cases, the same individuals since the military services of some of those soldiers of fortune were paid allowing them to abate elephants of Central African natural parks. This was confirmed by general Dhaffane himself⁴⁴.

Djotodia and his UFDR cofounder, Zakaria Damane, have been trading diamonds for years in Vakaga and Haut-Kotto. After the coup that overthrew Bozizé, Damane was appointed

³⁸ UNICEF estimates that, excluding Antibalaka child soldiers, in Central Africa there are 6,000 children enrolled in armed groups.

³⁹ Interviews of former child soldiers with author. April 2014.

⁴⁰ INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP. «République Centrafricaine: l'intervention de la dernière chance», Policy Briefing n° 96, Nairobi/Brussels (2.12.2013) <http://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/regions/afrique/afrique-centrale/republique-centrafricaine/b096-central-african-republic-better-late-than-never.aspx>

⁴¹ MARCHAL Roland, quoted by MARTINELLI, op. cit.

⁴² The Janjaweed militias are formed by members of nomadic tribes in Chad and Sudan. In 2003, the Sudanese government contracted its services to suppress the rebellion in Darfur. The International Criminal Court accused them of numerous massacres against civilians.

⁴³ A single horn can rise up to \$ 175,500 in the Asian market. Quoted in AGGER, op. cit.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

commander of the city of Bria, 600 kilometres from Bangui, the epicentre of a rich diamond region. The political power as a way to control resources looms again on key orientations of Seleka in which religion plays a marginal role. Nouredine Adam and Abdoulaye Hissene, founders of CPJP, were too involved in this trade on the axis from Vakaga to Bria. "CPJP was always about the diamonds trade and the money; they never really tried to take power before they joined Seleka"⁴⁵ claimed a local journalist.

1.3. The secessionist challenge

If the aim to consolidate the control of diamond-rich northern regions was one of the triggers of Seleka offensive, the same purpose seems also evident in secessionist challenge launched by the rebel coalition. The alliance was formally dissolved by Djotodia in September 2013, in a vain attempt to disassociate himself from their atrocities. In January, after Djotodia's resignation and the establishment of a new transition Government, which includes representatives of all parties⁴⁶ of the conflict, most members of Seleka retreated to the north. At that time, the massacres of Muslims by Antibalaka became a fierce persecution which has forced more than 100,000 Central African Muslims into a mass exodus.

After the withdrawn in their fiefdoms, the Seleka has been reorganized. On May 10 the coalition held a summit in N'dele, whose conclusions were extremely disappointing for the United Nations, France and the national transitional government. These actors had probably obtained assurances that the congress would result in a commitment of the exSeleka (renamed Revolutionary Forces) to the disarmament and its conversion into a political movement. This hypothesis seems to be coherent with the fact that the UN even put their aircraft available to Seleka leaders, while Sangaris provided security for the holding of the summit.

The result was the opposite. The final statement of the summit announced a "parallel administration"⁴⁷ which included all the structures and positions that composes the military and security structure of a State. First, an "Army Chief of Staff", one responsible of the "Police" and a chief of the "Gendarmerie" were appointed. Besides a political committee was chosen to prepare a new meeting that will result in a definitive political direction. In the statement, Seleka leaders even ask the international community to facilitate the partition of the country. This sentence was lately crossed out in the statement that some journalists⁴⁸ received, reflecting that the movement is divided between those who want to split the CAR and seize power in the new state and those who aspire "to seek understanding", Dhaffane

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Both Seleka and Antibalaka considered themselves underrepresented. The second group do not recognize one of its representatives, Léopold Narcisse Bara.

⁴⁷ According the Central African Prime Minister, André Nzapayéké, in a speech broadcasted on radio stations across the country on May 19, 2014.

⁴⁸ The author received the document with the full sentence underlined in red. However, several Central African journalists claimed to have seen the statement with the crossed-out sentence.

said. But for this Seleka leader, the path for this “understanding” is only one: the application of N’Djamena consensus, agreed in April 2013, following the coup that overthrew Bozizé. This consensus imposed a roadmap for the transition to Djotodia’s government. The President demanded in exchange for the Seleka the posts of prime minister, as well as the ministries of Defence and Mines, which implied the monopoly of the use of force and wealth of CAR.

In the statement, the alliance has arrogated to itself the role of Muslim's defender, asking the "exfiltration" of Muslims people who are still blocked in the south⁴⁹, an opportunistic argument in light of the fact that the Seleka crimes contributed to put the Islamic population in the target.

Days after the N’dele summit, the "Army Staff", led by General Joseph Zindeko, settled in Bambari, 400 kilometres from the capital, establishing an outpost that leaves in the back the strategic city of Bria. However, Sangaris deployed in Bambari reacted to this movement trying to impose the confidence measures under its UN mandate and forcing the Seleka members quartering⁵⁰. The result was a gunbattle in which several CAR nationals died.

The threat of secession seems impossible to maintain given the opposition of the international community, which does not permit the creation of a new State under Seleka’s rule, fearing that it might become a haven for mercenaries, armed groups and terrorists from neighbouring conflicts, including members of Boko Haram. This secession seems even more unlikely given the next deployment of MINUSCA⁵¹, a mission adopted under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and therefore allowed to use military force to keep the peace. However, this partition with which Seleka is threatening is, in many ways, a fact. The rebel coalition controls the north and is present in Kaga-Bandoro and Bambari, two key cities located on the two principal roads from Bangui to the northern half of the country.

2 THE ANTIBALAKA. FROM A POPULAR MOVEMENT TO A CRIMINAL BAND

2.1. The Bozizé’s manipulation

In the nineties, some Central African citizen, feeling themselves neglected by the State, organized self-defence committees to fight against the road blockers. In the summer of

⁴⁹ Nowadays, in the Southwest, there are very few large groups of Muslims. The most populous is, almost certainly, the Muslim district of Boda, where 11,000 people live under siege. Interview with Colonel Eric Valory (28/04/2014)

⁵⁰ According humanitarian workers that quoted Sangaris liaison officer with NGOs. Author's interviews with NGOs workers (05/25/2014)

⁵¹ The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) was established by the Security Council through the resolution 2149/2014 on 10 April. MORALES GONZÁLEZ Alberto, «MINUSCA: una operación de mantenimiento de la paz para República Centroafricana», IEEE (26.5.2014)

http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2014/DIEEEO59-2014_MINUSCA_una_OMP_RCA_AlbertoMorales.pdf

2012, these committees were reactivated to confront the Seleka. This initiative has been quickly seen as an opportunity to maintain his power by President Bozizé. In December, Bozizé began to play the card of religious hatred and called young people of the outskirts of Bangui to fight the "foreigners". His children, Socrate and Jean-François, started distributing knives among civilians and one of his aides, Levy Yakete, created the Citizens Coalition of Opposition to Armed Rebellions (COCORA in its French acronym), a militia whose purpose was to protect the regime.

Antibalaka lacked any ideology beyond the desire to overthrow Djotodia⁵², and they did not have a hierarchical control either. However, these self-defence groups were then joined by ex FACA men that provided training and weapons such as grenades, AK-47 and RPG⁵³. Although this group have arrogated to itself the role of defenders of Christians, its members shows an animistic symbolic representation. Antibalaka name refers to the belief that Grigis (traditional amulets) that its militia men wear give them immunity to AK-47 bullets (anti-balles-AK).

The Antibalaka can be divided, non-exhaustively, into four major categories⁵⁴, which then decline in many gangs⁵⁵. The first category is formed by members of the local self-defence groups, while the second is composed mainly by former FACA officers. A third group, often faced with the first two, is known as "false Antibalaka" simple criminals and looters who steal and extort the population.

2.2. The "bozizistes" and the multiplication of leaders

The fourth faction, perhaps the most dangerous and accused of many of the atrocities against Muslims, are the "bozizistes": Bozizé's supporters. This group is the most radical, because the former president and his clan, whose role in this crisis has been defined as "intolerable"⁵⁶, continue to fuel the rebellion. The UN Security Council confirmed this accusation announcing its decision to sanction him and freeze their assets and those of

⁵² Author's interview with Sébastien Wénézoui. This Antibalaka leader claimed his only goal was to "overthrow Djotodia". May 28, 2014.

⁵³ AGGER, op.cit, 13. During an author's interview with a group of Antibalaka in Bimbo, near Bangui, one of them said the grenades he was carrying came from the arsenal of the FACA. The Antibalaka also have numerous small arms.

⁵⁴ According the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect "Upholding the responsibility to protect in the Central African Republic", Policy Brief, (12/05/2014) <http://www.globalr2p.org/media/files/car-may-2014-brief.pdf>

⁵⁵ In Bimbo, near Bangui, a group of Antibalaka whose commander is known as "Rambo" (one former FACA), meets both civilians and former military. Author's interviews in May 2014.

⁵⁶ BENSIMON, Cyril, «Bozizé dans le collimateur de la France», Le Monde (5.3.2014) http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2014/03/05/centrafrique-francois-bozize-dans-le-collimateur-de-la-france_4377737_3212.html

Yakete⁵⁷ claiming these two men have "provided military and financial support for militants seeking to return to power".

One of the bozizistes leaders, the self-proclaimed political coordinator of the movement, is Patrice-Édouard Ngaïssona, former Minister of Sports. Ngaïssona, who represent Antibalaka hardliners, "has seen in the increasing power of these self-defence militias one opportunity to reposition itself in the political arena⁵⁸," a purpose that is almost an imperative for him to avoid prison. Ngaïssona is on probation and is suspected of having stolen a great deal of public funds.

This former Bozizé's minister is leading the Antibalaka of Boy Rabe, a neighbourhood of Bangui, where many young people have found an occupation and the feeling of power given by having a gun in the hands. With no military training and no clear hierarchy⁵⁹, they show obedience to Ngaïssona, who follows Bozizé's⁶⁰ orders. According to an unconfirmed allegation of Chadian newspaper Alwihda, the former head of state, allegedly fled to Uganda with the support of Yoweri Museveni, could have provided important items of weaponry to the Antibalaka.

Days after the Congress of Seleka in N'dele, Antibalaka also held a summit, protected by Sangaris. That summit resulted in the appointment of a new general coordinator, Sebastien Wénézoui, an engineer aged 34, and former civil servant, who claimed that Antibalaka "cannot keep killing Muslims"⁶¹. Ngaïssona did not recognize his appointment and, according Wénézoui, threatened to kill him.

Since, according to Navy Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Antibalaka "are responsible for most of the killings [in CAR] and are evolving into criminal gangs that not only hunt down Muslims but also prey on Christians and other non-Muslims", it seems likely that both the international community and the transitional government favoured then the candidacy of Wénézoui. This leader claims to want to look for a "joint statement with Seleka" to encourage the end of hostilities. Wénézoui himself recognizes⁶² that the country's president, Catherine Samba-Panza, asked them in a meeting on 6 May, to nominate a single focal point, an objective that seems far from reality. Just in Bangui, there are at least ten different gangs of Antibalaka, which obey to different leaders.

⁵⁷ The UN Security Council ordered sanctions, an asset freeze and a travel ban, against Bozizé, Yakete and the Seleka's number two Nouredine Adam on 9 May. U.S President Barack Obama also impose similar sanctions against these three men and, in addition, against former president Michel Djotodia and Seleka's warlord Abdoulaye Miskine.

⁵⁸ DUHEM, Vincent, «Ngaïssona, l'homme qui se voulait roi des Antibalaka» Jeune Afrique (4.3.2014) <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/JA2772p038.xml1/>

⁵⁹ Colonel Eric Valory claimed that Antibalaka groups formed by ex FACA are easier to handle, because they respond to the hierarchy and military discipline. The Antibalaka of Bimbo have maintained the hierarchy indeed.

⁶⁰ According to a French security source quoted in Ibid.

⁶¹ Interview with author, op.cit.

⁶² This former civil servant said he has been working as an informant for the French Army. Ibid.

Nevertheless, in mid-June, after Ngaïssona had held a meeting with a Seleka delegation, headed by Eric Neris Massi, both Antibalaka leaders have announced their reconciliation and their decision of keeping Ngaïssona as political coordinator and Wénézoui as deputy.

In the speech of Wénézoui and Ngaïssona we find that religious arguments are evoked only opportunistically. These two leaders seem willing to forget their alleged principles if they are guaranteed to receive a slice of the cake. Both Antibalaka as Seleka demand the complete integration of the militia men⁶³ into the regular Army. This demand shows how they share a patrimonialist view of the State and the aim of seeking political power and the impunity linked with it. Some Antibalaka members have already achieved this goal. For example, Captain Charles Grémangou, former head of Staff of Antibalaka, currently chief of Defence minister's cabinet⁶⁴.

CONCLUSION

Despite the religious bias acquired by the attacks on civilians in the Central African Republic, the reasons of the current crisis should be refer not to religion, but to political and economic reasons. These roots fall under the progressive collapse and spoliation of a State appearing in a complex regional conflict system. The decomposition of this State which was unable to provide a decent life to its citizens, the weakness of the armed and security forces, as well as the absence of a judicial system, have left the way open to the activities of armed groups, warlords, mercenaries and offenders. All of them have widespread a culture of violence in the country.

To reverse this trend, it is essential to rebuild the Central African State. The prerequisite is to end impunity and rebuild the judicial and penal system in order to purge responsibilities for atrocities and human rights violations that have been committed in CAR. In order to achieve this goal, the International Criminal Court must step up its investigations, particularly on leaders that are helping to fuel the conflict. The accountability is itself a sine qua non condition for the necessary complete overhaul of the country's Armed and Security Forces.

The next deployment of MINUSCA, which has included a strong Police contingent (2,000 men of the 12,000 men planned), should try to cut other sources of funding of armed groups, ensuring the protection of country's natural resources and, above all, ensuring the safety of civilians, especially Muslims. This task is due, not only to an ethical imperative, but also because the persecution that this community is suffering fits perfectly with the rhetoric of jihadist groups. These groups might turn this conflict into a new magnet to recruit followers

⁶³ Wénézoui argues that his movement has about 75,000 men, of which "between 10% and 15% are former FACA members". This figure appears unreliable since this leader does not control all the movement and can hardly know how many people are active in each gang. Ibid

⁶⁴ Quoted by BENSIMON Cyril, «La Centrafrique livrée aux chefs de guerre s'enfoncé dans le chaos» Le Monde, (7.6.2014) http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2014/06/07/la-centrafrique-livree-aux-chefs-de-guerre-s-enfonce-dans-le-chaos_4434054_3212.html

with the argumentation of Muslims as a persecuted population, a complaint repeatedly alleged by jihadist organisations which could contribute to drag the CAR into a permanent spiral of violence.

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* **NOTE:** The ideas contained in the *Opinion Papers* are the responsibility of their authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.