



State of Prey

Proxies, Predators, and Profiteers in the Central African Republic

By Nathalia Dukhan

Executive Summary

While foreign powers like Russia and France intensify their struggle for influence in the Central African Republic (CAR) against the backdrop of a rapidly increasing COVID-19 caseload, President Faustin-Archange Touadéra has turned the country into a breeding ground for transnational criminal networks.¹ The president and his foreign allies want to win the 2020 elections at any price. Money laundering and the trafficking of natural resources, drugs, weapons, and diplomatic passports are rampant. The most recent health crisis is unlikely to fundamentally disrupt the political status quo that has prevailed in CAR since the latest round of conflict began in 2012.

Awash in diamonds and gold but crippled by poverty, widespread conflict, and sectarian violence, the country is a breeding ground for crime. People are murdered, abducted, tortured, and arrested on a daily basis, according to the United Nations (UN), against a background of arbitrary detentions, cruel and inhumane punishment, extortion, and looting.² The COVID-19 pandemic is only the latest in a string of deadly crises in recent decades.^{3,4} More than half the population—about 2.5 million people—survives on emergency foreign aid.⁵ In the wake of this latest health crisis, CAR was the first country in the world to benefit from a European Union air bridge to deliver vital assistance.⁶

Since his 2016 election, Touadéra has received major foreign support to stabilize the country.^{7,8} CAR's predatory state apparatus, however, benefits the president's close entourage and foreign allies to the detriment of the wider population and its critical human development needs. In encouraging sectarian conflict and rampant corruption, the regime has exacerbated the crisis.⁹ The country's financial backers have shown apparent indifference to the rising number of corruption scandals at the highest echelons of the government and the expanding footprint of individuals connected to transnational organized crime.^{10, 11, 12, 13, 14}

Foreign powers use proxy groups to advance their political and economic agendas, enabling war profiteers to benefit from corruption and the war economy. They systematically exploit crisis response initiatives, such as the management of the health crisis, the political agreement with armed groups, and the elections. Without major reform, especially as concerns the political response and international engagement, the country will sink even deeper into brutal war, with devastating consequences for several generations. In order to restore peace, the international community and regional actors should overhaul the rules for political dialogue and demand transparent and democratic elections while more effectively combating those benefiting from corruption and war.



Main findings

- The regime has exploited the pandemic. Touadéra and his allies sought to declare a state of emergency in order to indefinitely delay the elections and extend both his mandate and that of lawmakers. In the process, Touadéra's circle paid nearly 300 million CFA francs (approximately \$510,000) in bribes to lawmakers backing a constitutional amendment to extend the presidential term. The Constitutional Court ultimately rejected what the opposition termed an attempted electoral coup. As a result, allegations of massive fraud have marred voter registration.
- As part of an attempt to eliminate an armed faction threatening Touadéra's reelection plans, the regime and its Russian ally the Wagner Group, a state-linked security enterprise that implements the Kremlin's foreign policy, supported armed groups accused of abuses against civilians. In order to bolster these groups, the government allegedly allowed about 80 Sudanese mercenaries into the country under the orders of Ali Muhammad Ali Abd-Al-Rahman, known as Ali Kushayb. The International Criminal Court has accused him of forming and leading in 2002 and 2003 the Janjaweed militia that participated in the Darfur genocide in Sudan.
- In order to counter efforts by Touadéra and his Russian ally to maintain a grip on power, some French networks have activated their regional and local networks, including armed groups, to prevent Touadéra's reelection and return pro-French leaders to the helm of the state.
- In just five years, Touadéra has turned CAR into a breeding ground for transnational organized crime. Powerful businesspeople work in the shadows to get the Central African president reelected. They include individuals involved in money laundering and the trafficking of natural resources, drugs, weapons, and diplomatic passports.

Analysis

- Ahead of presidential and legislative elections, French and Russian networks are working in the shadow of Central African and regional actors to influence the electoral process and advance their respective economic and geostrategic interests in CAR and Central Africa as a whole.
- The conflict is lucrative for the country's rulers and for criminal groups hampering peace, human rights, and the rule of law.
- The Khartoum accord—a 2019 political agreement signed between the government and armed groups that has received major international support—has fueled a war economy, increased the financial and political power of armed group leaders, and deepened the crisis.
- International sanctions imposed against certain leaders of armed groups have failed to hamper their military power or reduce violence in the country. However, sanctions such as asset freezes, travel bans, and visa denials against Central African officials and international facilitators who are connected to the global financial system and who benefit from the war economy would help to more efficiently disrupt the networks responsible for fueling war.



Main recommendations

UN Security Council, European Union, and their member states

- **End support for the implementation of the Khartoum accord.** Stop political support of and financing for initiatives that fuel government corruption, the war economy, and impunity, such as aid meant to implement the Khartoum agreement. Instead, support an innovative process based on international, regional, and national dialogue in order to provide a framework for responding to the many challenges resulting from the proxy war.
- **Ensure elections are effectively transparent and democratic.** Ensure a vigorous audit of the entire electoral process by an independent body, hold the Central African government accountable, and secure the participation of civil society. If the elections are marred by major fraud, suspend recognition of the legitimacy of the future Central African government, shift funding priorities, and suspend budget support.
- **Target entire networks that systematically destabilize crisis response initiatives and have links to transnational organized crime.** Investigate and, where appropriate, impose targeted network sanctions on individuals and entities, with a focus on government officials and international facilitators connected to transnational organized crime networks.
- **Effectively combat the trafficking of minerals from conflict zones in CAR.** The EU should ensure the effective implementation of its new conflict minerals legislation, which comes into force in January 2021, with a focus on ending the trafficking of gold from Central African conflict zones to the EU. The UN Security Council should include concrete measures targeting the war economy and criminal networks in the mandate of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA).
- **Prosecute economic and financial crimes.** Support CAR's Special Criminal Court, the International Criminal Court, and other national jurisdictions in investigating and prosecuting financial crimes.

Banks and financial institutions

- **Combat organized crime networks.** Financial institutions operating in CAR or with affiliates in CAR should conduct enhanced monitoring for transactions involving transnational organized crime networks, particularly those with close ties to the natural resource sector, and submit suspicious activity reports to financial intelligence units as appropriate.



Strategies of Chaos*

As COVID-19 spreads across the Central African Republic (CAR), twin political and security crises have emerged ahead of the December 2020 elections.

Power-hungry actors exploit the health crisis

In order to cement their control over the electoral process, CAR's rulers sought to indefinitely extend the presidential mandate and lawmakers' terms through a constitutional amendment.^{15, 16, 17} The ruling party Mouvement cœurs unis (United Hearts Movement, or MCU) cited force majeure stemming from the pandemic to declare that the elections could not take place in December 2020, as required by the Central African Constitution.¹⁸ The president's inner circle paid bribes to lawmakers, a common practice under the Touadéra regime, in exchange for their votes and vowed to extend their mandate by two years, members of Parliament told The Sentry.^{19, 20, 21} The lawmakers who chose to sign on to the amendment allegedly received 2.5 million CFA francs (about \$4,300) each, with a total of nearly 300 million CFA francs (about \$514,000) spent on bribes in a country that only had three ventilators at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak to meet the needs of a population of five million.^{22, 23, 24}

The political opposition decried the effort as an attempted electoral coup led by a president who would lose in a democratic vote, political party leaders told The Sentry.^{25, 26} The Constitutional Court rejected the amendment plans. "The people have clearly indicated their willingness to seal the president's mandate as written in the Constitution," the court said. "This measure cannot be reconsidered, not even by lawmakers without 'betraying this willingness.'"²⁷ The political opposition, led by Anicet-Georges Dologuélé, has largely condemned the country's rulers for exploiting the crisis, calling for democratic and transparent elections.²⁸

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Ousted President of Parliament Karim Meckassoua has similarly sought to benefit from the crises, with the backing of certain military officers and regional heads of state, privately maneuvering for a political transition.^{29, 30, 31} Meckassoua has long sought to become president. However, democratic elections are unlikely to favor Meckassoua, who only obtained 3.21% of the 2016 vote.³² He previously tried and failed to become prime minister under the transitional government led by Catherine Samba-Panza in 2014.³³ Meckassoua is seeking to repeat the effort under a future transition so that he can secure a position of strength to influence the vote, with the aim of ultimately becoming president.³⁴ The international community has provided a muted response to a transition, only privately airing concerns that the country could once again

**This report and its findings are based on interviews, documentary research, and financial forensic analysis undertaken by The Sentry. As indicated herein, some sources spoke to The Sentry under the condition that their names would not be revealed out of concern for their safety or other potential retaliatory action. In addition to interviews, The Sentry sought out credible information from additional independent sources, expert commentary, financial data, documentation, press reports, and other information. The Sentry endeavored to contact each of the persons and entities discussed in this report and afford them an opportunity to comment and provide further information. In most cases, these persons and entities did not respond to The Sentry's requests. Responses received have been included in the analysis and are otherwise reflected in the report itself. To distinguish comments received by The Sentry through this response process from other publicly available statements made by these entities, the report notes which statements were received in response to questions posed by The Sentry.*



lose legitimate or sovereign authority.^{35, 36} However, members of the Constitutional Court have recently voiced concerns regarding “a distortion between the state of preparation for the elections and the deadline for convening the electorate on September 27, 2020,” which opens the door to a possible transition.³⁷ Supporters of the transition have also developed a draft political agreement creating a government of national unity.³⁸

Criminal networks work for Touadéra’s reelection

The government’s attempts to exploit the COVID-19 crisis are part of a long series of efforts to keep Touadéra in power. In order to secure the president’s reelection and increase financial gain, the country’s rulers have provided a safe haven for transnational criminal groups. Some criminal networks have worked to tip the election toward the president, including through electoral fraud, in order to curry favor.

Money laundering and trafficking in gold, diamonds, weapons, diplomatic passports, and drugs have proliferated in CAR. The ruling network’s rampant corruption has enabled transnational organized crime and terror financing to thrive in recent years.³⁹ Since Touadéra came to power in 2016, the regime has granted Central African diplomatic passports and key posts, such as those of special presidential advisor and honorary consul, to foreign businesspeople.^{40, 41, 42} Touadéra’s reelection would help strengthen these actors’ grips on power, ensuring their businesses’ long-term success and shielding them from legal proceedings. The country is becoming a “rogue state” governed by major international criminal networks, a Bangui-based diplomat told The Sentry.⁴³

In one case, a Lebanese businessman with alleged links to terror financing and diamond trafficking in conflict zones, according to the UN and independent observers, has expanded his dealings and become a power broker in CAR under Touadéra.^{44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50} Aziz Nassour has developed a close relationship with the Central African president, who intervened to award him public contracts to digitize government-issued identification documents, sources close to the matter told The Sentry.⁵¹ Through these government contracts, Nassour has allegedly sought to conceal diamond, drug, and weapons trafficking.^{52, 53, 54} In return for the contracts, sources indicated that Nassour has made death threats, particularly against detractors of his plans for Touadéra to run for reelection and win in the first round.⁵⁵ “What’s at stake here... is a money laundering platform and winning the election,” a Bangui-based diplomat told The Sentry.⁵⁶ In response to questions posed by The Sentry, Nassour denied these allegations in a lengthy letter. In particular, he denied having any role whatsoever in the elections, including engaging in election interference. Nassour also denied any involvement in intervention in government contracting processes by him or the president, as well as any involvement in the gold and diamond sectors.⁵⁷

Nassour has been linked to counterfeiting, money laundering, and major diamond trafficking in conflict zones in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.^{58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63} He has also been accused in the media of helping finance Hezbollah and Al-Qaeda, a claim he vehemently denies.⁶⁴ In 2004, a Belgian criminal court sentenced Nassour to six years in prison for heading a criminal organization.⁶⁵ The court also found that Nassour had helped perpetuate bloody conflicts and human rights violations. He bought from rebels diamonds sourced from conflict areas before smuggling them to Antwerp, according to the verdict.^{66, 67, 68} Nassour had long laundered diamonds from Congolese rebel groups through companies operating in CAR, according to the transparency group Global Witness.⁶⁹ In response to questions

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posed by The Sentry, Nassour denied having had close relations with African dictators and having been involved in any criminal activities.⁷⁰ In 2004, the UN Security Council imposed economic sanctions and a travel ban on him that have since been lifted.⁷¹ However, if recent allegations are true, convictions and sanctions don't appear to have deterred Nassour, who now operates in CAR, where he is acting as Touadéra's close ally.⁷²

In 2017, acting as the Oman-based Almadina Group's chief executive in CAR, Nassour won a strategically important government contract to digitize government-issued identification documents.^{73, 74} According to sources interviewed by The Sentry, Nassour bribed senior Central African government officials to oust his business rivals.^{75, 76, 77, 78} Under the original, unsigned version of the contract, Almadina would produce between 80 and 110 million official ID cards, making Central African citizens pay up to four times more to obtain official documents.^{79, 80} This form of identification would be required to vote, according to sources close to the matter.^{81, 82} In response to questions posed by The Sentry in September 2020, Nassour wrote, "I am not affiliated with this group and I do not have any shares in this company, but I am a close friend of the company's owner's husband. I help the owner without any compensation in this country." He strongly denied that government officials such as the president intervened, explaining that Almadina won the contract following a "sealed tender submission based on evaluation by RCA tender committee."⁸³ Members of the ruling MCU party have allegedly distributed birth certificates to Touadéra sympathizers, but the country stopped producing IDs in 2013.^{84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90} The holders of such documents can obtain receipts allowing them to vote for Touadéra and MCU candidates.

Nassour's family members have also formed four companies in CAR since 2016—Sahar Diam, Sahar Bi, Nassour Diam, and Sahar Mining—one of which specializes in identification documents, while the others are gold and diamond buyers.⁹¹ Although these companies are officially inactive, some sources claim that Nassour Diam has been involved in illicit activities in the diamond sector, yet Nassour wrote to The Sentry that he is not connected at all with the companies or their business.⁹² Nassour told The Sentry that he does not work with diamonds in CAR, nor with gold, drugs, or weapons.⁹³ A video posted on social media and reviewed by The Sentry, however, shows that Nassour has declared himself "a businessman who does everything, including diamonds and mining."⁹⁴ CAR's diamond sector, which has played a major role in perpetuating the armed conflict, is rife with illicit activity. More than 80% of the country's diamond production is still smuggled abroad—some 270,600 carats of diamonds in 2017.^{95, 96, 97}

The Khartoum accord: Trading away Touadéra's reelection

In February 2019, the Central African government and 14 armed groups made a political deal that led to the signing of a peace agreement in the Sudanese capital Khartoum. Rather than making peace, the signatories sought to advance their political and business interests alongside those of their respective allies. "The Khartoum accord has nothing to do with peace," a Bangui-based diplomat told The Sentry just months before the signing.⁹⁸ Self-interested parties involved in the peace talks have profited from war while advancing their own agendas, the diplomat added.^{99, 100}

The government and its Russian ally, the Wagner Group, exploited the agreement to secure the reelection of Touadéra and lawmakers from the MCU party. Indeed, the accord cemented the support of 14 armed groups that can play a determining role in how voters cast ballots in territories they control.¹⁰¹ The deal's Russian sponsors paid tens of thousands of dollars to armed group leaders, who secured political and military posts, thus gaining de facto political legitimacy in a climate of impunity.^{102, 103, 104} Armed groups leaders used part of the funds obtained during the peace negotiations to buy arms and ammunition.¹⁰⁵ They have since secured more weapons, recruited regional mercenaries, extended their control to new territories, and expanded their gold and diamond trafficking.¹⁰⁶ Two months after signing the accord, Touadéra



appointed certain armed group leaders to supervise the establishment of MCU units and local electoral authorities in their respective areas of control, revealing the president's plan for reelection.¹⁰⁷

The Khartoum accord, or the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation, is hardly the first of its kind. All 11 political agreements in 13 years have failed.¹⁰⁸ Five times more armed groups participated in the Khartoum negotiations than in the peace deals that began in 2007.¹⁰⁹ The UN counted 50 to 70 daily violations of the Khartoum accord within five months of its signing, leading a source close to armed groups to declare that these militia groups “use civilians like cannon fodder.”^{110, 111} The perpetrators of the conflict have been rewarded, to the detriment of justice and security. As reflected in the 11 UN Panel of Experts' reports published since 2014, the parties have no intention to end the conflict.¹¹² Such an outcome would require that they lay down their arms and forfeit the territories and economic resources that they control. As long as armed group leaders reap financial gains from participating in peace talks and signing documents, they will remain involved in destabilization initiatives.¹¹³

Destabilization initiatives secretly planned

Before signing the Khartoum accord, armed group leaders participated in rounds of talks, with some of them meeting for the first time.^{114, 115} The gatherings came at the behest of Nourredine Adam, who has been under UN sanctions since 2014.^{116, 117} Adam headed the Séléka coalition behind the 2013 coup and serves as the political leader of the Front populaire pour la renaissance de la Centrafrique (Popular Front for the Rebirth of the Central African Republic, or FPRC), which at one point controlled more than a third of CAR's territory.¹¹⁸

As the accord was being signed, five armed groups formed a new military alliance aimed at overthrowing the Touadéra regime, in a move dubbed Khartoum Plan B, sources close to armed groups told The Sentry.¹¹⁹ Martin Koumtamadji, also known as Abdoulaye Miskine, the leader of the Front démocratique du peuple centrafricain (Democratic Front of the Central African People, or FDPC) heeded Adam's call. He was followed by Ali Darassa, who heads the Union pour la paix en Centrafrique (Union for Peace in CAR, or UPC), Bi Sidi Soulemane, alias Sidiki Abass, of Retour, Réclamation et Réhabilitation (Return, Reclamation, Rehabilitation, or 3R), and Mahamat al-Khatim of the Mouvement patriotique pour la Centrafrique (CAR Patriotic Movement, or MPC). These allies planned to reinforce two military hubs in order to pressure Touadéra's regime—one in the Northeast led by Miskine under the aegis of the FPRC, and the other in the West led by 3R's Sidiki.¹²⁰ While Sidiki is publicly named as 3R's leader, a source close to 3R told The Sentry that he is actually the group's military coordinator under the command of Cameroonian national Ali Garba, alias Dougsaba.¹²¹

Six months after the agreement was signed, Miskine announced that he planned to overthrow the central government “by any means necessary,” which triggered UN sanctions in April 2020.^{122, 123} The president of the Republic of Congo, Denis Sassou Nguesso, and Meckassoua have sponsored Miskine since 2014.^{124, 125, 126, 127, 128} Meckassoua, who is also close to French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, has sought to overthrow Touadéra at all costs, threatening the use of armed groups such as Miskine's, sources close to the matter told The Sentry.^{129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134} Although Miskine was placed under house arrest in Chad's capital N'Djamena in November 2019, sources close to the matter confirmed that he is still involved in destabilization plans alongside the FPRC.^{135, 136, 137}



Proxy War

In CAR, foreign powers conduct a proxy war by exploiting regional and local actors to advance their political, economic, and geostrategic agendas. The conflict has largely centered around two main axes: pro-Russian and pro-French actors. The Khartoum accord reflects the geostrategic battle pitting foreign interests against one another, particularly France and Chad against Russia and Sudan.¹³⁸ The fall of Sudan's longtime leader Omar al-Bashir, the Khartoum accord's original guarantor, weakened Russia's posture across Central Africa.

Armed Groups of the Central African Republic's Proxy War

Pro-Russian and pro-CAR government 	Pro-French 
<p>MLCJ Movement of Central African Liberators for Justice Leader: Hamza Toumou Deya Gilbert</p>	<p>Anti-Balaka Leaders: François Bozizé, Francis Bozizé</p>
<p>PRNC Party to Rally the Central African Nation Leader: Zakaria Damane</p>	<p>MPC CAR Patriotic Movement Leader: Mahamat al-Khatim</p>
<p>RPRC Patriotic Rally for the Renewal of the Central African Republic Leaders: Herbert Djono Gontran Ahaba, Arnaud Djoubaye Abazène</p>	<p>FPRC Popular Front for the Rebirth of the Central African Republic Leaders: Nourredine Adam, Abdoulaye Hissène</p>
	<p>3R Return, Reclamation, Rehabilitation Leaders: Ali Garba (Dougsaba), Sidiki Abass</p>
	<p>UPC Union for Peace in the Central African Republic Leader: Ali Darassa</p>
	<p>FDPC Democratic Front of the Central African People Leader: Abdoulaye Miskine</p>

The Wagner Group's grip on sovereignty

Confronted with French disengagement on military and political fronts, a weakened Touadéra turned to Russia soon after his inauguration.¹³⁹ Moscow quickly deployed the Wagner Group, a semi-state security actor led by Yevgeny Prigozhin,



a Saint Petersburg oligarch with close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin.¹⁴⁰ Since 2018, the Wagner Group has been tasked with implementing the Kremlin's foreign policy in CAR.^{141, 142} Former Russian intelligence agent and Saint Petersburg police officer Valery Zakharov, who serves as the Central African president's security advisor and as the main architect of the Khartoum accord, was sent to the country on an official mission to head the Wagner Group's team of instructors.^{143, 144, 145} In order to consolidate and expand Russian investment in the country and across the region, the Wagner Group has worked toward Touadéra's reelection. The Wagner Group has also sought, with limited success, to negotiate access to minerals with armed groups.¹⁴⁶

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The Central African government granted exploration and exploitation licenses to the Wagner Group, which owns Lobaye Invest, a mining company active in CAR since 2018.^{147, 148} Traveling across the country aboard Lobaye Invest planes to meet with armed group leaders, Zakharov has allegedly purchased gold and diamonds sourced from rebel-controlled zones.^{149, 150, 151} Zakharov, who made these purchases in cash with \$100 bills, has sought to rally support for Touadéra from armed groups, according to sources.^{152, 153} During an April 2020 trip to the UPC's stronghold, he is said to have pressed Ali Darassa to force the population living in his area of control to vote for Touadéra and to bar the president's political opponents from the zone, thus preventing them from campaigning.^{154, 155} In return, Zakharov offered Darassa amnesty and government posts, a source close to the matter told The Sentry.¹⁵⁶ Darassa does not appear to have taken up the offer, instead joining other rebel leaders in working to disrupt the elections as part of Khartoum Plan B.¹⁵⁷

The Wagner Group has hamstrung these armed groups' anti-Touadéra efforts. When Miskine, the FDPC leader, openly violated the Khartoum accord and threatened to overthrow Touadéra with FPRC support, individuals linked to the Wagner Group joined the government in providing political, military, and financial support to three rival armed group leaders, sources close to the matter told The Sentry.^{158, 159, 160} The leaders, Hamza Toumou Gilbert Deya, Herbert Djonon Gontran Ahaba, and Arnaud Djoubaye Abazène, later joined by Moustapha Maloum, alias Zakaria Damane, had just obtained guarantees that they would keep their ministerial posts in Bangui as a result of the Khartoum accord.^{161, 162} Their government-backed groups mounted deadly attacks in the northeastern city of Birao—a central base for the FPRC—in September 2019, aiming to eradicate the FPRC and prevent any destabilization plan against Touadéra.^{163, 164, 165} In the following months, the clashes spread to several cities that traditionally fall under FPRC control.¹⁶⁶

A “number of local leaders of armed groups controlling areas in the northeastern part of the country have been campaigning for Touadéra's re-election,” the UN Panel of Experts on CAR observed.¹⁶⁷ Djoubaye Abazène wrote that “as a citizen, I greatly appreciate the efforts of the President to bring peace to CAR... I strongly support him,” in response to questions posed by The Sentry in September 2020.¹⁶⁸ CAR's Special Criminal Court, staffed by national and international judges with the authority to try serious offenses such as war crimes, pointed to the “barbaric and bloodthirsty nature of the abuses perpetrated in Ndélé for more than nine months,” including by pro-Touadéra armed groups, since late 2019.¹⁶⁹ These deadly attacks tinged with ethnic conflict led to the killing of dozens of civilians and the displacement of tens of thousands of people, particularly the Runga ethnic group, which is seen as being affiliated with the FPRC.^{170, 171} The UN stabilization mission in CAR, MINUSCA, initially intervened to stall the FPRC's attempts to regain control of lost positions.¹⁷² The government, the G5 group of partner states and institutions, and MINUSCA initially condemned the FPRC's belligerence without noting the abuses committed by the pro-government alliance.^{173, 174} As a result, the international community's position is seen as partisan.^{175, 176}



As part of the offensive targeting the FPRC, individuals linked to the Wagner Group allegedly facilitated the deployment of Sudanese mercenaries led by Ali Muhammad Ali Abd-Al-Rahman, known as Ali Kushayb.¹⁷⁷ The International Criminal Court has accused Kushayb of having formed and led in 2002 and 2003 the Janjaweed militia that participated in the Darfur genocide.^{178, 179} In February 2020, around 80 Sudanese mercenaries led by Kushayb joined the ranks of CAR's pro-government alliance, according to the UN.^{180, 181} In exchange for troops to combat the FPRC, the Touadéra regime vowed to protect Kushayb against any attempted arrest in CAR after the new Sudanese government announced its intent to transfer the warlord to The Hague, a member of an armed group close to the matter told The Sentry.¹⁸² In early 2020, UN Special Representative Mankeur Ndiaye, who heads MINUSCA, asked to keep Kushayb's presence in CAR confidential because MINUSCA was "about to get a hold of" him, two sources close to the matter told The Sentry.¹⁸³ In response to questions posed by The Sentry in September 2020, MINUSCA's legal section stated that "the work of the United Nations is open and transparent, except insofar as the nature of information concerned is deemed confidential in accordance with the internal applicable rules."¹⁸⁴ In June 2020, after helping perpetrate more mass atrocities, Kushayb voluntarily surrendered to the authorities in CAR and was transferred to The Hague for trial.¹⁸⁵

French interference

Le Drian, France's foreign minister, and French Defense Minister Florence Parly both officially provided guarantees of French support to CAR at the end of 2018.^{186, 187} However, France and the G5 have publicly opposed Touadéra's plans to extend his mandate, pressuring the government to hold elections.¹⁸⁸ In fact, some French military networks with links to French officials or private security companies have quietly worked to prevent Touadéra from winning another term,¹⁸⁹ thus weakening the Wagner Group's influence.¹⁹⁰

On June 4, 2020, the day before the Constitutional Court ruled against extending the president's mandate, France officially announced that it was granting the court an aid package worth €90,000 (\$100,000).¹⁹¹ The court's decision marked the first break with the president's wishes since 2016 and concluded that the request was unconstitutional.¹⁹² Following the ruling, Touadéra shifted his position in favor of the vote despite the health and security crisis, warning that a delay "would lead to political deadlock and a constitutional vacuum with disastrous consequences."¹⁹³ Pro-French networks, meanwhile, are seeking to regain power in CAR, either through elections or a political transition.¹⁹⁴

In the leadup to the elections, some French military networks, along with Meckassoua, have sought to publicly expose the Touadéra regime's bad governance and the Wagner Group's shadowy deals in the country, sources close to the matter told The Sentry.^{195, 196} Some networks are working to boost the election prospects of their favored candidates, primarily Karim Meckassoua and ex-transitional President Catherine Samba-Panza.^{197, 198} These contenders have weak electoral bases and were linked to corruption and the mismanagement of public resources when they held senior political posts.^{199, 200, 201, 202}

Meckassoua allegedly facilitated former President François Bozizé's surprise return to Bangui in December 2019.²⁰³ ²⁰⁴ As part of a broader tactic with the backing of French military networks and Congolese President Sassou Nguesso, Meckassoua aimed to redirect votes in favor of Bozizé to further weaken Touadéra's electoral base without enabling

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Bozizé's return to power.²⁰⁵ Bozizé has vowed to regain power by force, if necessary.²⁰⁶ During private talks hosted by Sassou Nguesso in his hometown of Oyo in late June 2020, however, Bozizé was asked to support Meckassoua's presidential bid, according to three sources close to the matter.^{207, 208}

French military networks have historically maintained close relationships with members of armed groups, supporting the formation of certain alliances while seeking to splinter others in order to advance French interests and thwart Russian agendas.²⁰⁹ The FPRC and UPC are "traditionally pro-French groups," a French diplomat told The Sentry.²¹⁰ The UN has accused both groups of perpetrating war crimes and crimes against humanity.^{211, 212} Fadoul Bachar, a close associate of both FPRC leader Adam and some French military networks, indicated in an April 2018 correspondence reviewed by The Sentry and confirmed by a source that the FPRC "wants the French authorities to dictate a well-crafted roadmap." While "it is not mandatory that the president comes from our side... Touadéra must leave."^{213, 214} Miskine received support from Bachar to engage in arms trafficking in 2019 to implement Khartoum Plan B.^{215, 216, 217}

With Khartoum Plan B, French military networks and mercenaries from neighboring countries have seen an opportunity to disrupt Touadéra's reelection efforts, with the mercenaries making economic gains in the process. The FPRC, UPC, and MPC have transferred some of their combatants to boost 3R positions in western CAR, two members of armed groups and a UN source told The Sentry.²¹⁸ Alongside Sidiki, Dougsaba, the 3R leader, coordinated the group's expansion from their rear base in western CAR, which prompted UN Security Council sanctions against Sidiki on August 5, 2020.^{219, 220, 221} Sudanese combatants led by Ramadane Assimeh, the younger brother of infamous Séléka leader Moussa Assimeh, and Chadian and South Sudanese mercenaries have strengthened 3R positions, according to sources close to the matter.^{222, 223, 224} Retired Cameroonian officers who had been members of the elite military force the Rapid Intervention Battalion (RIB) have also reportedly joined 3R.²²⁵ The group has sought to recruit new combatants from Cameroonian refugee camps that are home to nearly 300,000 Central Africans, most of whom belong to the Fulani ethnic group and fled CAR during the height of the conflict in 2014.²²⁶

In expanding its areas of control, 3R has collected more taxes and revenue, especially in the gold, diamond, and cattle sectors.²²⁷ As a result, a bolstered 3R has been able to acquire deadly weapons, including anti-personnel mines, anti-tank mines, and surface-to-air missiles, to target national forces and MINUSCA contingents.²²⁸ A UN peacekeeper and three national defense troops were killed in what were reportedly 3R attacks in June 2020.^{229, 230} The group has also sought to bribe MINUSCA staff to obtain confidential information crucial to military tactics, a source close to the armed group told The Sentry.²³¹

Pro-French actors and military networks have deliberately chosen to support armed groups that occupy large territories with the nation's highest population density. At the prompting of some French military networks, 3R and UPC have merged in order to wield more influence over the elections, two sources close to armed groups told The Sentry.²³² Similarly, they have capitalized on 3R's power to disrupt Russian plans to get Touadéra reelected, according to sources close to 3R and UPC.²³³ MPC and 3R leaders have already blocked voter registration in the areas they control, while UPC leader Darassa has tried to avoid a military escalation between his group and government forces supported by MINUSCA. Although officially adopting a more nuanced approach compared to the other groups, which led to his recent naturalization as Central African, he may still refuse to comply with the demands of the government and the Wagner Group in the future.^{234, 235, 236}



A Way Forward: Rethinking the Peace Process

Against the backdrop of a chaotic political and security situation that has exacerbated ethnoreligious divides, the Khartoum accord's stated goal of peace has been largely compromised on the eve of elections. However, the international community finds the agreement to be "the only viable path toward sustainable peace."²³⁷ Since its signing, the Touadéra regime has favored the profiteers who benefit from corruption and the war economy, and it has exploited the COVID-19 pandemic to remain in power. The Central African president lacks popular support, and backing from a precarious alliance of armed groups, criminal networks, and the Wagner Group is wearing thin. The fall of Omar al-Bashir's regime has further weakened Touadéra and Russian influence in the region.

The conflict in CAR is neither a civil war, nor a war based on ideology, religion, or ethnicity. Rather, it is a proxy war driving the country further into violence and chaos. Engaged in a geopolitical battle, foreign powers—particularly France and Russia—are enabling profiteers to make a fortune out of misery. As with Russia's approach, France's interference has favored its own geostrategic and economic interests in an attempt to bring the former French colony back under its sway. This battle for influence comes at a heavy human cost. Without a new political framework and added pressure for accountability, warring parties and their respective allies will flout the agreements they have signed.

Recommendations

The Sentry recommends simultaneously deploying the political, diplomatic, legal, and financial tools detailed below to fight endemic corruption and violence in CAR so that a virtuous cycle of peace respectful of human rights and the rule of law can prevail.

Develop a new political response strategy

The G5 group of partner states and institutions

- **End support for the implementation of the Khartoum accord and assess the mediation process.** End political support and financing of initiatives that fuel government corruption, the war economy, and impunity, such as aid earmarked to implement the Khartoum agreement. The G5 and the UN Security Council should urgently commission an independent audit on the impact of the Khartoum agreement, including lessons learned from previous agreements, from the negotiation to the implementation phase.
- **Support a multilevel political response.** Foster dialogue at the international, regional, and national levels focused on providing solutions to the drivers of the international conflict. By opening space for a formal dialogue between the various actors involved in the conflict in CAR, political legitimacy should shift from armed groups to more traditional Central African actors. An independent body should identify the various actors to the conflict and determine their individual interests, while an arbitration commission should be entrusted with organizing and conducting a political dialogue involving all implicated national, regional, and international actors. The international community—France and Russia included—should commit to following the resulting roadmap.

Government of CAR

- **Remove armed group leaders from their political posts and hold them accountable,** especially those believed to have committed serious human rights abuses and natural resource trafficking.



- **Establish and implement an anti-corruption policy at the top echelons of government** and encourage transparency in public management. In particular, end contracts signed outside any legal framework and encourage transparency in the tender attribution process and financial conventions in accordance with the 2016 Constitution.

Support democratic and transparent elections

European Union, UN Security Council, and their member states

- **Ensure a vigorous audit by an independent body of the entire electoral process** and hold the Central African government accountable. For instance, the European Parliament should request independent electoral observation and, if the elections are marred by major fraud, adopt a resolution suspending recognition of the Central African government's legitimacy and shift political and funding priorities in CAR. Similar resolutions have been adopted in the past, including 2020/2521 (RSP), which condemned Guinea for using violence against protesters of the president's plan to change constitutional provisions on presidential term limits, and RC-B6-0282/2005, which called on EU member states to abstain from making unilateral declarations on the regularity of the Togo elections.
- **Demand guarantees of non-interference in CAR's elections from France and Russia.**

Government of CAR

- **Hold transparent and democratic elections.** Commit to holding democratic presidential and legislative elections without interfering with the mandate of public institutions, such as the Constitutional Court and the National Elections Authority. Ensure that the electoral rules are respected, including the candidates' ability to campaign both inside and outside the capital Bangui.

Counter criminal networks and the war economy

UN Security Council and member states

- **Target entire networks involved in destabilizing and criminal activities, including government officials.** Investigate and, if appropriate, impose targeted network sanctions on individuals and entities. Chad, Cameroon, the Republic of Congo, and Sudan, along with France and Belgium, are just some of the countries with regional or financial ties to CAR that can trace and seize the proceeds of corruption and financial crimes.
- **Expand MINUSCA's mandate to include concrete measures that undermine CAR's war economy, thus weakening criminal networks.** As an example, MINUSCA should be empowered to deploy special static and mobile units to strategic positions and frontier posts that function as transit points for natural resource and weapons trafficking, primarily through Cameroon, Chad, and Sudan.
- **Enforce the arms embargo.** The arms embargo should remain active as long as the Central African government uses armed forces, including non-conventional armed groups, to maintain a grip on power by turning those forces against civilians.

European Union and member states

- **Support sanctions against networks involved in political destabilization or linked to transnational**



organized crime. Support sanctions targeting high-level officials in the Central African government, along with other entities, groups, organizations, and individuals, as provided under the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

- **Effectively combat the trafficking of minerals, particularly gold, from conflict zones in CAR.** Implement the EU's latest Conflict Minerals Regulation, which comes into force in January 2021, with a focus on ending the trafficking of gold from Central African conflict zones to the EU. The EU should communicate more broadly to exporters and importers the impact of its new regulations and secure the means to enforce them.
- **End impunity for spoilers and combat the malign activities of French actors, in particular.** The French government should initiate legal action and administrative sanctions against both public and private French individuals and entities—as well as French residents—who contribute to the destabilization of CAR. Enforce France's 2003 law (2003-340) on the repression of mercenaries in order to reduce the involvement of French actors in efforts to overthrow or undermine CAR's state institutions or territorial integrity.

Russia

- **End Central African mineral trafficking by the Wagner Group and other Russian networks.** Hold Russian networks accountable for illegally exploiting and purchasing conflict minerals and encourage legitimate companies to invest through CAR's legal channels.
- **Implement Russian legislation against mercenary activities.** Moscow should enforce the criminal code's prohibition of mercenary activities (Article 359), particularly across the region of Central Africa.

United States

- **Combat transnational organized crime networks.** The US Department of the Treasury should investigate and, if appropriate, impose network sanctions on transnational organized crime networks—particularly those involved in money laundering or trafficking in passports, drugs, minerals, or arms in CAR—under Executive Orders 13581 and 13863.
- **Publish an advisory highlighting CAR's money laundering and illicit finance risks.** The US Treasury Department's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) should publish an advisory, similar to the one it released on South Sudan, to combat money laundering.

Government of CAR

- **End benefits for organized and transnational crime in CAR.** End the practice of granting individuals linked to transnational crime benefits such as diplomatic passports, official posts at the top of the government, access to CAR's banking system, and facilitated company creation.
- **Reform the mining sector.** Officially close gold and diamond buying offices that flaunt the legal framework. Fight corruption in contract allocation and mining exploration.

CAR's Special Criminal Court and the International Criminal Court

- Expand the courts' mandates to investigate and prosecute economic and financial crimes.
- Support sanctions and legal actions against spoilers by strengthening information sharing systems with investigators of economic and financial crimes.



Private banks and financial institutions

- **Counter organized crime networks.** Financial institutions operating in CAR or with affiliates in CAR should conduct enhanced monitoring for transactions involving organized criminal networks.
- **Conduct enhanced due diligence.** International banks with correspondent ties to CAR-based banks should conduct enhanced customer due diligence, focusing on the risk areas identified in this report. Politically exposed persons and other actors with close ties to natural resource sectors, including diamonds and gold, should be evaluated for potentially enhanced risk profiles.
- **Issue suspicious activity reports for transactions involving the natural resource sector.** Financial intelligence units should require banks and financial institutions to submit suspicious activity reports on any transactions involving the natural resource sector to identify illicit financial flows.

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