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The “Green Diamond”: Coffee and Conflict in the Central African Republic

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Men affiliated with the anti-Balaka movement—one of the groups that benefit from the Central African Republic’s coffee trade—in May 2014. (Photo by Jerome Delay/AP)

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Summary

- Coffee is a small part of the conflict economy of the Central African Republic (CAR), but the coffee trade, harvest cycles, and control of key markets all play a vital role in shaping economic and conflict dynamics within the country.
- By engaging in predatory practices on the trade and transport of coffee, armed groups reap up to \$2.75 million in funding each year from their control of CAR’s coffee market.
- The lucrative nature of the coffee trade creates disincentives for profiting armed groups to seriously participate in the peace process.
- For example, despite the signing of a peace accord between the government and fourteen militia groups in February 2019, several of the signatory armed groups remain active in controlling roadblocks on the lucrative Sudanese trade circuit.
- Tracking the involvement of armed groups in the markets for coffee and other conflict resources provides strategic insight into when—and how to prepare for—spikes in conflict between the armed groups competing over the spoils.
- A revitalized coffee industry could serve as the impetus to support reengagement between coffee farmers and traders in order to help restore former trading relationships and gradually sideline armed groups.



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**ECONOMICS &
ENVIRONMENT**

ABOUT THE REPORT

This report focuses on one of the lesser-studied aspects of the Central African Republic's conflict economy—the coffee trade. Findings are based on field research carried out in the country's eastern and western coffee growing zones and key hubs such as Bambari and Bangui in June and July 2017, along with a broader analysis of the country's armed group dynamics, conflict economy, and the peace accord signed in February 2019.

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A member of the anti-Balaka armed militia walks next to United Nations peacekeeping soldiers in the village of Makunzi Wali, Central African Republic, on April 27, 2017. (Photo by Baz Ratner/Reuters)

Coffee—A Conflict Resource

Lucrative markets for cattle, timber, diamonds, gold, and other minerals have been linked to pervasive conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR). One important but understudied facet of CAR's active conflict economy is its "green diamond"—coffee. Although coffee is a relatively small part of CAR's economy compared to its other resources and commodities, the coffee trade offers an interesting snapshot of how trade, harvest cycles, and control of key markets have all played vital roles in shaping the economic and conflict dynamics at play within the country.

Coffee accounted for about a fifth of CAR's preconflict export earnings, despite its competition with other lucrative resources and the small amount of land used for growing coffee. Nevertheless, instability has caused a sharp downturn in coffee production, falling from an all-time high of 362,000 60-kilogram bags (the standard international measure for coffee production) in 1989 to an all-time low of 3,000 bags in 2018. From the beginning of the current conflict, production fell from 30,000 bags in 2011 to 10,000 bags in 2012, just as the Séléka movement of rebel militia groups began to form.

Coffee has also had an important impact on CAR's conflict economy, and vice versa. Despite the significant harm that instability has caused to the coffee industry, the demand for coffee generated along the Sudanese trade circuit "secured" by armed groups is paradoxically the only thing keeping CAR's southeastern coffee market from collapse. The coffee-growing areas in western CAR, by contrast, have had less direct impact from armed groups and associated violence. Nevertheless, the western coffee industry is cut off from international trade routes, as well as regional trade

Peacekeeping efforts in CAR need to be attuned to and anticipate the rhythms and movements of the conflict economy if they are to have a chance at ending the cycles of violence consuming the country.

routes secured by armed groups (like the Sudanese trade circuit), and its isolation from demand has made it crumble.

To highlight the extent of coffee's importance within the context of the current conflict, this report presents a case study of Bambari, perhaps CAR's most vital coffee-trade city, in two crucial phases: first, during the rise of armed group control from 2014 to 2016, and second, during an assault on the city from competing armed groups in 2017 and the subsequent months. From 2014 to 2016, an ex-Séléka faction called the Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (UPC) used force to gain control over the southeastern coffee market, increase power over coffee exports via the Sudanese trade circuit, and embed predatory practices such as roadblocks and shared tax schemes with the CAR government. The UPC's actions further illustrate the extent to which coffee helps fund conflict in CAR; as a staple of the Sudanese trade circuit, the critical coffee trade provided \$2.75 million in funding to armed groups as of November 2017.¹ Armed groups that profit from this trade thus have serious disincentives to participate seriously in the peace process. Indeed, despite the signature of a renewed peace agreement in February 2019, several of the signatory armed groups remain active in controlling roadblocks on this circuit.

The case study focuses on the assault on Bambari in February 2017, timed to coincide with the onset of coffee-buying season. Several armed groups known as the Coalition, eager to gain a foothold in the coffee market and the Sudanese trade route, first courted and then attacked UPC forces. During the formation of the Coalition, ex-Séléka armed groups allied with and emboldened anti-Balaka factions—their long-term enemies—to overcome the UPC's formidable military power in Bambari. This surprising alliance had impacts beyond the February 2017 operation, as the empowered anti-Balaka groups began a fresh wave of violence that destabilized the region throughout the rest of the year. The fighting in Bambari prompted action from the UN peacekeeping force, MINUSCA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic), which struck a deal with the UPC to loosen its grip on Bambari by pushing the group out of the city but allowing it to move eastward. The deal had limited long-term effects: the UPC not only remains active in and surrounding Bambari, but the deal was regarded as an instance of collusion between the UN and the UPC that allowed the UPC to expand rapidly through eastern communities.

The snapshot of the coffee industry in CAR indicates the important role a relatively humble commodity has played in the country's political and conflict economy. The economic potential of the coffee trade in a future, more secure CAR, as well as the role it can play in the current peace process, should therefore not be underestimated. A closer look at CAR's coffee trade offers a glimpse of the scale of funds being amassed by conflict actors from the country's shadow economy. Coffee production, with its connections to the internal workings of CAR's different resource markets, seasonal movements, and political figures behind the scenes, is a crucial marker for predicting the tactical shifts of CAR's complex cast of armed groups. Peacekeeping efforts in CAR need to be attuned to and anticipate the rhythms and movements of the conflict economy if they are to have a chance at ending the cycles of violence consuming the country. The example of CAR's coffee industry demonstrates that practitioners should not focus solely on the most lucrative resources and commodities when trying to understand a conflict economy.

THE SÉLÉKA REBELLION

For CAR, one of the poorest countries in the world, coffee has been an important cash crop since colonial times. Its production peaked in 1989 at 362,000 bags.² In fact, even though CAR has numerous (and even more) lucrative resources, such as diamonds and gold, coffee comprised more than 20 percent of its export earnings prior to the current crisis, which began in 2013.³ Coffee plantations stretch across approximately 65,000 hectares in CAR, occupying only 1 percent of all arable land. Coffee plants grow in lush, green forest areas, in two main zones in the southwest and southeast of the country—from southwest of the capital Bangui to Berbérati, and from Bambari south to the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in the center south. CAR produces solely green (unroasted) coffee.⁴

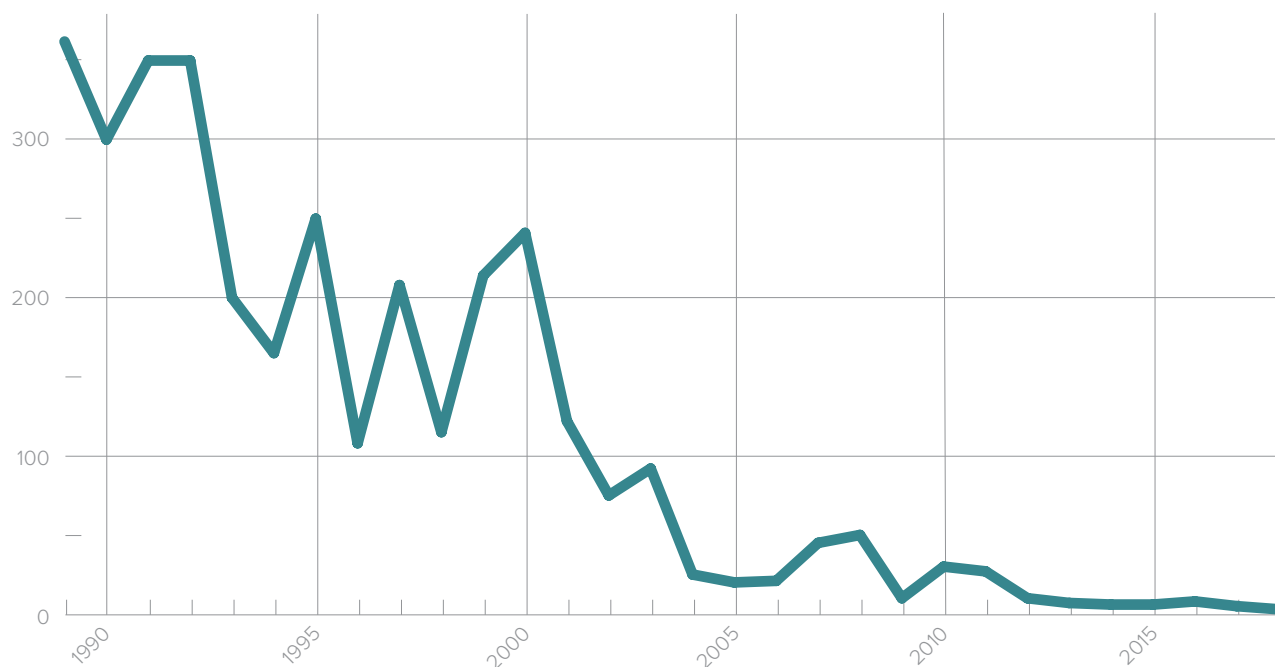
Unfortunately, instability has beset CAR since its independence from France in 1960, significantly impeding its access to the thriving global coffee market. As shown in figure 1, the most drastic decline in the country's coffee output occurred between 1992 (which was one of CAR's top three coffee-producing years on record) and 1993, when production fell from 350,000 bags to 200,000 bags. This drop, which coincided with the end of André Kolingba's presidency, was attributed to the overvaluation of CAR's currency, the CFA franc (XAF), and dealt a major blow to its coffee, cotton, and timber exports.⁵ The CAR coffee industry spent the following decade in a state of flux, reaching a new production low of 10,000 bags in 2009. Even with this setback, production tripled to 30,000 bags in 2010, and production levels remained fairly steady in 2011. Unfortunately, in the tumult following the formation of the antigovernment Séléka movement, production fell back to 10,000 bags in 2012.

The Séléka movement was composed of several predominately Muslim rebel groups from the northeast, united by dissatisfaction with the government's response to the end of the Central African Bush War (2004–7), its failure to properly implement peace accords, and the exclusion of Muslims from CAR's state institutions, particularly its security sector. The ranks of the Séléka alliance swelled with fighters and mercenaries, many drawn from the remnants of local and regional armed groups, particularly from Chad and Sudan. Many of these elements looted and committed atrocities against citizens as they moved through the country. In response, village-level "self-defense" groups, drawn mainly from CAR's Christian and animist majority, formed and became known as "anti-Balaka"—a reference to the talismans worn by fighters for supernatural protection against bullets. The Séléka took control of the capital Bangui in March 2013, forcing President François Bozizé from office. Séléka leader Michel Djotodia was installed as president, but he struggled to assert control over the loose alliance of armed actors who had brought him to power. Looting and violence continued to devastate capital and countryside alike, adopting an intercommunal religious dimension that stirred fears of genocide.

In January 2014, the international community intervened. Chadian president Idris Déby brokered Djotodia's resignation. A National Transitional Council under interim President Catherine Samba-Panza guided the country through a transition period, until elections in late 2015 and early 2016 brought current President Faustin-Archange Touadéra to power. In spite of efforts to make progress on peace negotiations, as of December 2019 at least 70 percent of CAR remained under armed group control.⁶

The conflict sparked a massive economic downturn in 2012–13, with gross domestic product (GDP) falling by 36 percent and agricultural production by 46.5 percent in 2013 alone.⁷ The

FIGURE 1. ANNUAL COFFEE PRODUCTION, 1989–2018 (THOUSANDS OF 60KG BAGS)



Source: US Department of Agriculture, Foreign Agricultural Service (Production, Supply, and Distribution database).

impact on the coffee market specifically has been devastating: since 2013, production has remained at or under 8,000 bags, hitting an all-time low of 3,000 bags in 2018. Safety concerns are one reason for this decline, as coffee-growing farms and plantations often are in rural locations that face greater risk of attack or extortion from armed groups.

The 2017 Assault on Bambari

Armed groups often profit greatly from conflict, and CAR is no exception. Beyond the steep toll the violence has had on CAR’s coffee farmers and the economy, the conflict has given armed groups many opportunities to exploit the domestic chaos. In fact, CAR’s “conflict economy” has boomed.⁸ Though the conflict began as an ideological struggle, armed groups soon engaged in predatory economic activities, taxing and extorting local populations to support their own economic interests and exerting control over territory to gain leverage over the state. Looting, roadblocks, and exploitation also became characteristic. The profits to be made from the conflict economy are a major disincentive for peace efforts such as disarmament and demobilization.

Armed groups in particular have played a central role in determining the fate of CAR’s coffee industry. Following the 2013 crisis, the coffee market in western CAR effectively collapsed, even though the area remained relatively at peace with some limited government control. Conflict disrupted the region’s traditional export chains to international markets, which had been established by the French and then run by European and Lebanese import-export companies based in Bangui.

“In 2013, the roads were cut and so the buyers didn’t come,” explained one small farmer in Mbaiki, a town close to Bangui. As CAR’s crisis intensified, the UN, international agencies, and humanitarian nongovernmental organizations expanded their presence in CAR. The country’s import-export companies soon shifted away from coffee and other exports to serve the new lucrative peace-keeping economy. At the same time, government agencies did not resume sending technical and financial support to farmers even after the immediate crisis passed, which meant that most small farmers lost up-front investments in their crops. Further compounding this challenge, agricultural agencies that used to assist in monitoring crops collapsed. Without their oversight, disease spread rapidly across crops in the west, and many farmers abandoned their coffee crops or diversified to crops such as palm. In 2018, some small efforts were made to restart trade in the west, with two local factories (Café Star and Café Nana) purchasing coffee from local farmers to process and serve the local market. Unlike in southeastern CAR, armed groups did not prop up the demand for coffee in western CAR—a factor that contributed to the trade’s prolonged decline there.

By contrast, the coffee-growing belt in southeastern CAR has remained largely intact, even though the region experienced some of the country’s worst and most frequent surges of violence. Bambari—the de facto eastern capital, and a key town for coffee in southeastern CAR—has been plagued by insecurity as armed groups clash for control. Surprisingly, although affected by the same dearth of governmental support, coffee production has bounced back in this region for one key reason: demand. Coffee from southeastern CAR traditionally has been split between the international export market in Bangui and an age-old regional trade route with the Sudanese, primarily from Darfur. Coffee is a lucrative trade in Sudan, absorbed by a strong domestic market. Traders come cyclically, with greater numbers during the dry season from November to May. They bring trucks filled with sugar, flour, oil, and plastic goods (such as chairs, tables, buckets, mops, and other household necessities) to local markets in eastern CAR, and return with coffee and other goods, such as sesame seeds and bamboo. As regional instability cut the routes to Bangui, the Sudanese captured this lucrative market, and armed groups based in Bambari stepped in to “secure” these transactions.

Given the near-collapse of the market in western CAR, the most prominent coffee-growing zone of economic interest in CAR is the southeast, the economic hub of Bambari and the coffee-producing forests to its south. Conflict actors on all sides have fought for control of the area, and armed group involvement has come to dominate the local economy. As such, the relationship between conflict and coffee in Bambari, and its subsequent disruption during the Coalition attacks in 2017, illustrate the development of the coffee-driven conflict economy in CAR.

UNION FOR PEACE CONTROL OF BAMBARI (2014–16)

Bambari fell under Séléka control in 2013 and has remained under the sway of the ex-Séléka UPC faction since 2014. The UPC claims to be the protectors of ethnic Fulani, a minority community of traditional nomadic herders and traders. The faction is headed by Ali Darassa, a mercenary believed to be from Niger or Chad. As the Séléka rebellion swept through CAR, Darassa and others from the Chadian Popular Front for Recovery rebel group joined the fight and lent their significant military experience and weapons. Darassa shrewdly remained in Bambari after Djotodia’s resignation, creating his own ex-Séléka faction as the alliance began to splinter.

The UPC grew in strength and sophistication, gradually extending its dominance over mining and trade in central CAR. It almost immediately positioned itself as a key facilitator of the coffee market. As with other armed groups in CAR, the UPC operates by mafia-style extortion, taxing locals and traders in exchange for protection while paradoxically posing the greatest threat to their safety. The faction profits from the coffee trade in two main ways: by imposing a percentage cut of state revenues to tax sales normally collected by the Office for the Regulation of Marketing and Quality Control of Agricultural Products (ORCCPA), and by taxing the movement of trucks and other vehicles through an advanced network of roadblocks across southeastern CAR.⁹

At the height of the crisis in 2013, the ORCCPA logged a record low yield of only 47 tonnes of coffee sold and taxed in Bambari, just 1 percent of the average annual yield in the years that followed. Local ORCCPA offices were ransacked, and government agents were forced to return to Bangui. In 2014 and 2015, the yield recovered to 4,000 tonnes per year. However, instead of trade going through the ORCCPA, the UPC extended control over the industry and imposed a delicate deal: the UPC would extract 50 percent of tax collected while giving the state the other half to buy favor with the Bangui authorities.¹⁰ In 2016, as coffee production rose to approximately 5,000 tonnes, the UPC renegotiated its deal with the state, insisting on a new 60/40 taxation arrangement (see table 1).¹¹

Traders also faced insecurity transporting goods along the country's roads. Armed groups provide "security" along these routes, mounting networks of road barriers where fees must be paid to whichever armed group controls the territory. Costs at these barriers fluctuate. The chief of the Ouaka Prefecture Transporters Association noted, "If the barrier is manned by anti-Balaka young guys, there can be problems. But if their boss is there, the price is usually fixed. If it's a UPC barrier, the cost can be high, but it is fixed and more predictable, which is better for us." A local researcher with the United States Institute of Peace traveled a number of key routes, counting the numbers of barriers and average cost per barrier. Each return journey from the Sudanese border to Bambari and the coffee-producing areas to its south can cost upward of \$15,000 per truck (table 2 presents the costs for just two key segments of the route in the summer of 2017).

One of the most important trade routes for armed groups in CAR is the Sudanese circuit, which "is dominated by the commercialization of Central African coffee to Sudan on the one hand, and the import of manufactured goods and arms from Sudan on the other." The route, which extends from the Darfuri city of Nyala to Bambari and beyond (see map 1), brought in an estimated \$2.75 million to armed groups as of November 2017.¹² The route is most active during the dry season, when Sudanese traders arrive in large numbers from February through April for the coffee-buying season. In the dry season, travel between Nyala and Bambari generally takes one week or less. In the rainy season, it can take a month or more if parts of the roads become temporarily impassable. From Bambari, traders travel into southern coffee-producing regions to purchase directly from local farms and small cooperatives.

The UPC gained dominance in the important Sudanese trade route by establishing a working relationship with Bambari's traders, including those in the coffee import-export business. Darassa, the UPC leader, accomplished this in part through scare tactics, exploiting fears and then swooping in to offer security and protection. The Sudanese also felt compelled to assist owing to a certain sympathy for the predominantly Muslim Séléka movement. As one trader observed, "Our identity as Muslims is strong; it brings us to work together because there is solidarity." Cooperation

TABLE 1. COFFEE PRODUCTION AND TAXATION INCOME IN EASTERN CAR, 2014–16

	Tonnes	Income at 60 CFA/kilo	Split of funds government	Funds to government (CFA)	Funds to UPC (CFA)	Funds to UPC (USD)
2014	4,000	240,000,000	50/50	CFA 120,000,000	CFA 120,000,000	\$215,338
2015	4,000	240,000,000	50/50	CFA 120,000,000	CFA 120,000,000	\$208,333
2016	5,000	300,000,000	40/60	CFA 120,000,000	CFA 180,000,000	\$312,500

Source: Interviews with ORCPPA, coffee traders, and armed group representatives, June 2017.

TABLE 2. KEY COFFEE TRANSPORT ROUTES, ROAD BARRIERS, AND PASSAGE COSTS

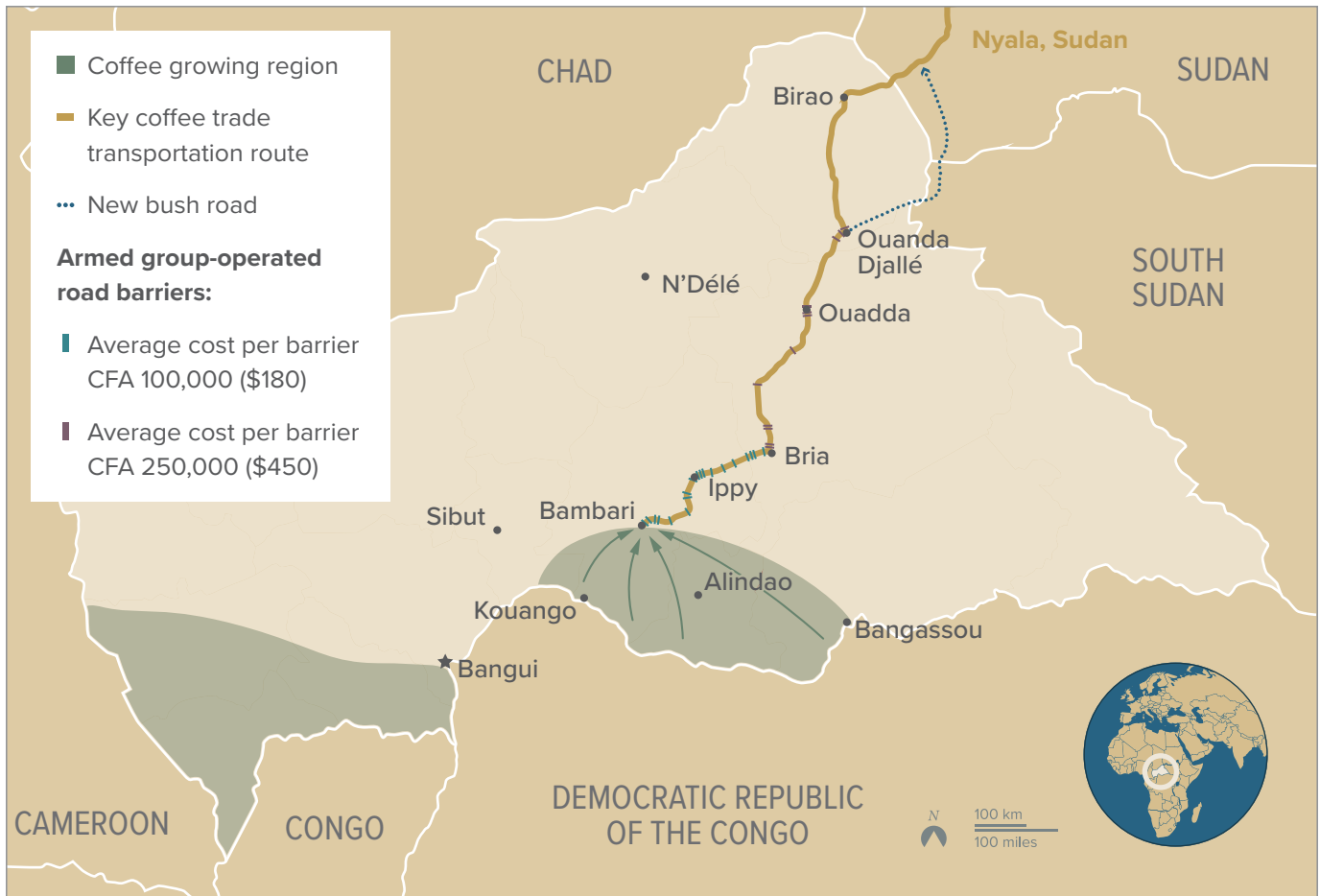
Key routes	Number of barriers	Total passage costs (CFA)	Total passage costs (USD)
Bria → Ouanda Djallé	11	CFA 2,750,000	\$4,950
Bambari → Bria	19	CFA 1,900,000	\$3,420
Total Bambari → Ouanda Djallé	30	CFA 4,650,000	\$8,370

Source: USIP local researcher fieldwork along transport routes, 2017.

among Sudanese and UPC forces helped eliminate Chadian competition over trade routes. One well-established Chadian trader reportedly complained that UPC taxes were too high and that he wanted to return to working directly with the government. In response, UPC elements reportedly “visited his house, caused some problems for him, and cut him off.” As a result, coffee exports to Chad have ground to a halt since 2014, paving the way for near-exclusive market control by the Sudanese. As one Darfuri trader put it, “The rules are clear: whoever pays can work.”

And pay they did. The UPC-dominated trade routes provided some predictability in the market, particularly for the prices at road blocks, but Sudanese traders nevertheless complained that the cost of doing business in CAR had risen exponentially in recent years, requiring additional payments as well as greater time and risk. As insecurity rose, tariffs increased, and road barriers became more numerous and less predictable. Peaks in insecurity routinely halted traffic along certain routes, while trucks waited out the fighting, raising costs for transporters and traders alike. Sudanese drivers faced greater risks when traveling south of Bambari to collect goods from farmers. This meant incurring additional costs to hire middlemen to source and transport the coffee. Additionally, insecurity motivated a tripartite force of Central African, Chadian, and Sudanese national forces to increase border security at crossings near the northern town of Birao. Traders soon found it more difficult to avoid Sudanese customs enforcement. As the costs of traversing CAR continued to mount, many traders opted to pursue a riskier route through the bush from Ouanda Djallé to circumvent customs agents.

In spite of mounting costs and hazards, Sudanese traders generally have played by the rules, paying large sums to the UPC and other armed groups along their routes, and have essentially captured the coffee market in return. A number of sources observed that trucks arriving from Sudan laden with goods for market have often had arms and ammunition concealed in the



MAP 1. KEY EASTERN CAR COFFEE TRADE CORRIDOR

Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

bottom, with such transfers aimed at sweetening the deal between traders and the UPC leadership. From 2014 to 2016, demand for coffee was so great that farmers and traders reported that coffee from northern DRC was being transported across the river to be mixed with coffee grown in CAR, because CAR prices were higher than those in the DRC. In spite of ongoing insecurity, the UPC managed to maintain control over Bambari and the surrounding area, fostering a strong resurgence of the southeastern coffee trade in the process.

THE FEBRUARY 2017 OFFENSIVE

By 2016, the UPC was perhaps the most militarily powerful and strategically positioned armed group in CAR. It began to extend control of territory and resources beyond Bambari, which upset other armed groups—ex-Séléka and anti-Balaka alike. The UPC’s expansion also inflamed tensions with the local communities subjected to the group’s increasingly predatory behavior.¹³

From the summer of 2016 onward, dynamics in the country began to shift. Elections in early 2016 brought President Touadéra to power. However, despite international hopes that elections would lead to political stability, the country’s armed groups (which were barred from participating in the elections) felt excluded. They grew impatient as the government made no sign of concessions

on key demands, no award of cabinet positions, and limited progress on promised disarmament.

Seeking to improve the negotiating power of the ex-Séléka groups, Noureddine Adam, leader of the Popular Front for the Rebirth of Central African Republic (FPRC) and former second-in-command of the Séléka movement, began moving around towns in eastern CAR seeking to reassemble various factions—FPRC, Patriotic Rally for the Renewal of the Central African Republic (RPRC), the UPC, and the Central African Patriotic Movement (MPC). By October, he had gained buy-in from the RPRC and parts of the MPC. The UPC, however, repeatedly signaled its disinterest, distancing itself from its counterparts. The new coalition grew tired of seeking the UPC's participation. Instead, given the huge financial and tactical gains at stake, it strategized to push the UPC out of Bambari.

Knowing that it would require significant force to dislodge the UPC, the coalition surprised many by creating a loose alliance with anti-Balaka elements, the very groups that had clashed with Séléka and ex-Séléka factions since the conflict's inception. This new Coalition of ex-Séléka and anti-Balaka—formerly long-term adversaries involved in years of attacks and counterattacks—marked an ominous shift in CAR's conflict dynamics and set in motion a dangerous series of events. Anti-Balaka groups, a consistent part of Bambari's conflict landscape, drew in further elements from across its stronghold in western CAR. Further east, towns like Bria, Ippy, Bakouma, and Bangassou, which had never harbored anti-Balaka groups, became the target of a roving group of FPRC and anti-Balaka from western CAR. The groups traveled town-to-town arming, organizing, and conducting anti-Balaka initiation rites with local self-defense groups and stoking anti-Fulani sentiment. These groups quickly spread, forming a new FPRC-manipulated, anti-Balaka component in eastern CAR.

In early February 2017, the Coalition launched an assault on Bambari (see map 2). Behind the scenes, ex-Séléka profit machinations were in motion. The conspirators timed their attacks to the beginning of the coffee-buying season to wrest control of profits from the UPC. FPRC leadership even reached out to Sudanese coffee traders in Bambari and Darfur, brazenly conveying that they had taken over the coffee tax collections this year. The Coalition coordinated strategic attacks on key UPC positions while also carrying out attacks on Fulani community members, raising concerns of potential ethnic cleansing. Peacekeepers from the UN mission in CAR, MINUSCA, stepped into the fray, seeking to protect civilians, and thwarted Coalition advancements. The UN brokered a deal with the UPC, and created safe passage for Darassa and his UPC elements to leave the town and relinquish control. MINUSCA saw this deal as a key success, believing it had prevented widespread massacre of ethnic Fulani. The UPC relented, withdrew from Bambari, and moved to the town of Alindao, east of Bambari. Peacekeepers swiftly reestablished control of Bambari, declaring it an “armed group free zone,” and restored some semblance of calm.

Despite significant violence, the Coalition failed to gain control of the coffee market in Bambari. Cowed but not beaten, their leadership pulled back to the eastern town of Bria and unleashed their frustrations in vicious reprisal attacks on UPC elements and ethnic Fulani civilians. The resulting cycles of violence further destabilized the region from late February 2017 through 2018, killing hundreds and displacing thousands.¹⁴

The Coalition failed in its objective to secure control of the town and its profit centers, but fighting nevertheless devastated the 2017 coffee-buying season in CAR and weakened the UPC's grip on the trade. Insecurity made it near impossible for traders to move trucks south of Bambari to collect coffee from farmers. As fighting spread to Bria, travel along that axis also was reduced.



MAP 2. 2017 COALITION ATTACK ON BAMBARI AND UPC MOVEMENT

Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

Christian middlemen with no affiliation to the warring parties were able to collect limited amounts of coffee, but for many this added step in the process made costs prohibitively high. Additionally, as UPC controls were shaken, anti-Balaka contingents gained strength, wreaking havoc on plantations across CAR’s southeastern coffee belt. Emboldened and armed by the Coalition, anti-Balaka and self-defense groups attacked farmers and trucks, looted from farms and fields, and damaged or stole equipment from the few small processing cooperatives still active.

COFFEE TRADE GOING FORWARD

In Bambari, a thin veneer of calm returned in late February 2017. With UN support and control over the town center, government workers, the national police, and gendarmes (military police) returned for the first time since the 2014 crisis. As part of this restoration of state control, the ORCCPA was able to reengage in the region, declaring its position as the sole body with the authority to tax coffee sales. However, official sales were meager and have remained low. In 2017, ORCCPA recorded just 900 tonnes of coffee sold, less than a fifth of the previous year’s yield. Behind that number, however, lie a number of market shifts. Despite Bambari’s supposed peace, UPC elements remained present and active. Sudanese traders complain that the government’s rosy portrayal of control was betrayed

by a massive increase in taxes in 2017, with government agents demanding 100 percent and the various UPC elements still present in the town demanding their 50 to 60 percent share on top.

Amid the chaos in early 2017, another trend began to emerge. Much of the coffee trade simply circumvented Bambari and government controls altogether, explaining the dramatically low yield recorded. Farmers and traders reported violence on their farms as armed actors seized coffee by force, with some anti-Balaka fighters directly looting farms and picking unripe crops, damaging plants and equipment in the process. Others reported that insecurity led to a counterflow, with CAR coffee moving south instead of north, crossing the Oubangui River to be sold in the DRC. Farmers explained that, fed by desperation when Sudanese traders failed to arrive, they were forced to send whatever crops survived the looting to fetch the much-lower Congolese market value. The farmers feared that the hit would have a domino effect, creating a deficit to invest in future crops.

The 2017 clashes in Bambari have had lasting effects on the trade and power dynamics in the area. The UPC has almost entirely cut the government out of the equation, and has resumed control of taxation on roads and in the towns surrounding Bambari. Official sales recorded by the ORCCPA continue to drop, and Bambari's role as a key hub for CAR's coffee market is in decline. The legacy of the violence created additional insecurity among Sudanese traders. Many such traders did not engage in CAR's market for the remainder of 2017, and expressed doubts about the trade's continued sustainability. Sudanese traders are drawn to CAR mostly for the coffee season, but their trucks arrive laden with raw produce and finished goods crucial to sustaining local markets and communities all over CAR. This economic dependency is particularly acute in towns in the eastern prefectures of Vakaga and Haute Kotto, which are far from Bangui and cut off from other supply channels by insecurity and poor road access. Ongoing instability and predation by armed groups has placed pressure on Central African and Sudanese traders alike. To date, few Sudanese are willing to travel beyond the eastern town of Bria, instead sending armed group-affiliated middlemen to the towns outside Bambari.

Shifting Dynamics in Eastern CAR and Renewed Conflict

The Coalition's attempt to seize Bambari, its coffee, and its economic spoils set in motion a chain of events that engulfed CAR in renewed crisis in 2017 and 2018. Further, two international community decisions in CAR may have fed surging conflict dynamics.

MINUSCA's peacekeeping intervention in Bambari prevented the Coalition attack from prolonging violence in the town. However, the peacekeepers' decision to offer Darassa and the UPC an ultimatum to withdraw from Bambari—rather than to confront or arrest Darassa or members of the UPC who were surrounded at the time and whose crimes were well-documented—provoked impatience and confusion from CAR's citizens. In reality, MINUSCA had limited capacity to carry out such arrests, particularly when facing the militarily sophisticated UPC, and well-founded fears of potential ethnic cleansing of CAR's Fulani minority forced its staff to make a difficult decision based on the situation before them. Yet Darassa was one of the most visible examples



Ex-Séléka soldiers stand in the ruins of a mosque, which residents claimed was attacked the night before by the anti-Balaka militia about 15 miles outside of Bambari on May 10, 2014. (Photo by Siegfried Modola/Reuters)

of mercenary armed group leadership in CAR, and allowing him to remain free sparked a profusion of rumors about collusion between the UPC and MINUSCA. FPRC and Coalition leadership used these rumors to stoke further aggression against Fulani communities. Additionally, the UPC's withdrawal from Bambari and relocation to the nearby town of Alindao fueled communi-

ty-level anxieties. If MINUSCA had allowed the UPC to leave Bambari and move to Alindao, what would stop UPC fighters from shifting their base to other eastern towns? Coalition recruitment and cultivation of the new anti-Balaka movement in eastern CAR was already underway; the UPC's seemingly UN-supported move eastward seemed to accelerate the spread of violence in towns and villages all across southeastern CAR. Throughout 2017 and 2018, Ali Darassa remained at large in CAR, and the UPC continued its predatory activities in a triangle-shaped zone that extended from the villages of Bokolobo (between Alindao and Bambari) to Pombolo (on the border of Basse-Kotto and Mbomou Prefectures) to the eastern town of Bria, making its presence felt as far as Obo, near the southeastern border with South Sudan.

Following their failed attack on Bambari in February 2017, the fragile bonds of the Coalition quickly unraveled and then devolved into fresh rivalries and confrontations between CAR's armed actors, shifting along sectarian and ethnic lines. The FPRC-fueled "new anti-Balaka" spun out of control, committing indiscriminate acts of violence against local Muslim communities. In May 2017, an attack on the UPC's new base of operations in Alindao left thirty-seven dead. In the same month, a particularly ferocious and well-coordinated assault on Bangassou forced two thousand Muslims to take refuge in a cathedral, surrounded by heavily armed anti-Balaka. Attacks in August 2017 killed at least twenty in Bema and fifty in Gambo, including six local Red Cross volunteers. Meanwhile, the ex-Séléka factions that had joined the Coalition hardened further along ethnic lines, with predominantly Runga FPRC, Gula RPRC, Arab MPC, and Fulani UPC pitted against each other as they endangered, displaced, and preyed upon civilian populations. In November 2018, the UPC attacked the town of Alindao, collectively targeting Christians sheltering in a camp for internally displaced persons. The fighters accused the refugees of supporting anti-Balaka groups which in turn had been targeting Muslim herders. At least 112 people were killed.¹⁵ Cycles of violence and retribution continued to escalate across the north and east of the country.

In an effort to stem escalating conflict, CAR's armed groups signed a renewed peace deal in February 2019.¹⁶ Among other things, the agreement sought to address armed group demands for integration into CAR's government and armed forces. Ali Darassa, alongside armed group leaders in other parts of the country, was elevated to the role of special counselor to the Office of the Prime Minister. He is now responsible for the development of Special Mixed Security Units, blending UPC armed elements with national army officers to provide security in the region he controls. Many have raised concern that this decision rewards Darassa and other CAR warlords who have been responsible for widespread violence and atrocities, elevating them to positions of greater power when they ought to be held to account.¹⁷

Conclusion and Recommendations

The “green diamond” of coffee is only one aspect of CAR's febrile conflict economy. Whoever controls the coffee market also benefits from links to significant cross-border trade networks with Sudan—networks crucial to sustaining marketplaces in the east, which in turn help perpetuate the conflict by supplying weapons and ammunition. The 2017 ambush in the vital coffee-growing region around Bambari set off fresh waves of violence that have affected CAR through the present day. The peace agreement signed in February 2019 did not stop the violence in the eastern coffee region—in fact, it may help institutionalize it. Fighting remains frequent and the fortunes of farmers, traders, and communities continue to diminish as armed group funding, control, and position have been strengthened. In the face of ongoing instability, communities in CAR need to work together to protect their way of life and the country's agricultural development. In the current environment, farming communities have to be empowered to resist the damaging advances of armed groups and gradually resume control over coffee growing and trading.

Practitioners have several possible approaches to consider when exploring ways to further peacekeeping efforts in CAR:

Coffee's economic potential should not be discounted. From an economic perspective, access to the global coffee market could greatly benefit CAR's recovery. Seventy-five percent of CAR's population relies on agriculture for their core income.¹⁸ The green coffee market had production values of more than \$16 billion as of 2015—roughly eight times larger than CAR's entire gross domestic product. CAR needs a stable and sustainable coffee industry in order to participate in this thriving global market and acquire a share of global demand. Although the country is currently cut off from licit international trade routes, beyond those controlled by armed groups and Sudanese traders, it nevertheless has opportunities going forward. For example, if trade routes can be secured from armed groups and CAR can regain access to the global coffee market, coffee production could again become pivotal to its economic and political stability, as it was prior to 2012.

The coffee industry can be used to bolster peace programs and processes. Coffee farming could help bolster peace, and local coffee-growing communities may draw inspiring lessons from the past. Before the crisis, community-level initiatives such as Project Centre Sud and PAPA AV (Agricultural Production and Village Self-Promotion Support Project) supported and promoted agricultural development in CAR. Similar initiatives undertaken in the current

environment could help communities resist armed groups and take back control of the coffee markets. Mediation and conflict-sensitive dialogue practices also could support reengagement between coffee farmers and traders in the key economic hub of Bambari. Spreading southward across the region, these efforts could begin to restore former trading relationships and sideline the armed groups' current role as middlemen. These farmer-trader relationships span community divides, offering opportunities to bring Christian farmers, Muslim traders, and Fulani ethnic minorities and other regional groups together. Over time, such connections may help soften the sectarian divisions that have become a feature of CAR society in recent years.

The coffee trade offers key insights into conflict actors' funding and movements in CAR.

Much like other lucrative conflict resource markets in CAR, the coffee industry is dictated by set time frames, which can be useful for estimating the actions and resource flows of armed groups and shadow economy traders. The CAR coffee market has three primary time frames: the dry season from November to May, the coffee-harvest season from November to December, and the coffee-buying season from February to April. February to April is the most opportune time for armed groups and traders to assume either offensive or defensive positions toward coffee markets, since these months overlap with both the lucrative coffee-buying season and the mobile dry season. The timing of the Coalition's assault on Bambari in February 2017 appears in large part to have been motivated by these considerations. In this way, coffee and the rhythms of other resource markets can give peacebuilders a strategic advantage in tracking potential flashpoints.

Other strategic insights can be gained by tracing actors' links to the coffee market. If the international community had taken into account the importance of control over the coffee market and Sudanese trade circuit prior to February 2017, peacekeepers may have been better prepared to engage with the different armed groups competing over the spoils. Further, the economic importance of the trade circuit also helps explain behavior that, on the surface, can seem counterintuitive to CAR observers, such as the unforeseen alliance between the FRPC and anti-Balaka groups.

That being said, the Central African Republic's coffee trade is only one small part of its shadow conflict economy. Efforts need to become attuned to and begin to anticipate the rhythms and movements of the conflict economy in many different types of resources if such efforts are to have a chance at ending the cycles of violence. National and international stakeholders must recognize the need to develop a deep understanding of the political economy of conflict in CAR beyond the often-studied, most lucrative resources. A more nuanced understanding will help craft an effective peacebuilding response, which will be crucial to moving the country beyond current patterns of cyclical violence.

Yet even if the government could reassert control over its full territory and resources, predation and inequity would still exist—it would simply swing back in favor of the state. CAR's government, public sector, and security institutions are not inclusive or representative of all CAR citizens, and notably excludes some of the communities currently fighting for control over conflict resources—the Fulani, the broader Muslim population, and communities in the northeast. A meaningful resolution of ongoing conflict and resource competition requires a political process and economy that promotes inclusion and equal representation across all sectors of society.

Notes

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2. Interview with Office for the Regulation of Marketing and Quality Control of Agricultural Products (ORCCPA), June 2017. Here and elsewhere, annual coffee production figures for the Central African Republic are from the US Department of Agriculture, Foreign Agricultural Service’s Production, Supply, and Distribution database at www.fas.usda.gov/data.
3. International Coffee Organization, “Country Profile: Central African Republic,” 2000.
4. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), “Africa Coffee Producing Countries, Annex 4,” www.fao.org/docrep/003/x6939e/X6939e10.htm.
5. Dhaneshwar Ghura and Benoît Mercereau, “Political Instability and Growth: The Central African Republic,” International Monetary Fund, May 2004, 10, www.sangonet.com/FichiersRessources2/CAR-polit-inst_wp0480.pdf.
6. Enough Project, “The Power-Hungry Are Fueling Violence in the Central African Republic,” *Le Monde*, August 21, 2017, https://enoughproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/LeMonde_Oped_English_0817.pdf. As of September 2018, the majority of the country remained under the control of armed groups. See News 24, “France Says ‘No Alternative’ to AU-Led Plan on CAR,” September 25, 2018, www.news24.com/Africa/News/france-says-no-alternative-to-au-led-plan-on-car-20180925; and Eleanor Beevor, “How Rebels became Kingmakers in the Central African Republic,” International Institute for Strategic Studies, April 24, 2019, www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2019/04/central-african-republic-armed-groups.
7. Amadou Sy and Amy Copley, “Emerging from Crisis: The Role of Economic Recovery in Creating a Durable Peace for Central African Republic,” GlobalViews Report no. 4, Brookings Institution, October 2015, www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/global_20160811_car_emerging_from_crisis.pdf.
8. Charles H. Anderton and John R. Carter define “conflict economy” in two parts: “(1) the study of violent or potentially violent conflict using the concepts, principles, and methods of economics, and (2) the development of economic models of appropriation and its interaction with production and exchange activities. By including the qualifier that conflict on some level be violent, the definition intentionally excludes the analysis of ordinary market competition and, more tentatively, activities like litigation and rent seeking. Clearly included by the definition is the study of what might be called macro conflict, comprising interstate conflict (e.g., war between states), intrastate conflict (e.g., civil war, domestic terrorism), and extrastate conflict between states and external non-state actors (e.g., international terrorism, colonial wars). Also included is the study of micro conflict, meaning conflict activities among private persons and organizations (e.g., theft, extortion, human trafficking)” (*Principles of Conflict Economics: A Primer for Social Scientists* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009], 2).
9. Created in 1991, the ORCCPA (Office de Réglementation de la commercialisation et du contrôle du conditionnement des produits agricoles), created in 1991, is the CAR government regulator for agricultural sector products. Its work on coffee typically begins at point of harvest in November/December, where staff interact with farmers to assess annual yield and quality and to start basic drying and processing. To start the coffee-buying season in February, the government publishes an indicator price for coffee sales, taking into account elements such as global market prices and costs for transport and storage. Buying season runs from February to April. Local ORCCPA agents in coffee-producing areas weigh, monitor quality, and tax coffee for the local, regional, and global markets. Before the crisis, the overall annual yield amounted to approximately 200,000 bags (the typical measure for coffee) or 12,000 tonnes.
10. See United Nations, “Midterm report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic extended pursuant to Security Council resolution 2262 (2016),” August 11, 2016, www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/694.
11. Calculations approximate for the Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (UPC) from coffee taxation alone at almost \$750,000 over three years—a massive figure, considering that the average CAR citizen’s annual income is under \$400 (per International Monetary Fund estimates).
12. Schouten and Kalessopo, *The Politics of Pillage*, 41, 46.
13. See United Nations, “Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic extended pursuant to Security Council resolution 2262 (2016),” December 5, 2016, 31–2, www.undocs.org/S/2016/1032.
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16. Associated Press, "Central African Republic Armed Groups Reach Peace Deal," *New York Times*, February 2, 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/02/02/world/africa/central-african-republic-peace-deal.html.
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18. FAO, "For families in Central African Republic, food situation dire," March 1, 2016, www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/384954/icode.

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