

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE PORTUGUESE QUICK REACTION FORCE TO THE PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC¹

A CONTRIBUIÇÃO DA FORÇA DE REAÇÃO RÁPIDA PORTUGUESA NA PROTEÇÃO DE CIVIS NA REPÚBLICA CENTRO AFRICANA

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Abstract

In 2017, following a drastic increase in violence in the Central African Republic (CAR), the United Nations Security Council decided to deploy a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) within the structure of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). Composed of Portuguese commandos, the QRF aims to increase MINUSCA's capacity to protect civilians in CAR. In this context, the purpose of this research was to analyze the role played by the Portuguese QRF as a special operations unit, as well as its contribution to the protection of civilians (POC) in the CAR. Methodologically, this study consisted of a mixed-methods case study on the MINUSCA QRF, in which the quantitative data and analysis played a secondary role in support of the qualitative data and analysis. As a result, it was possible to conclude that the Portuguese commandos have effectively contributed to the reduction of physical violence against civilians by performing POC tasks aimed at the short term. However, as the Portuguese QRF has not conducted POC tasks aimed at the long term, its contribution has been insufficient to establish a safe environment in the Central African Republic.

Keywords: Protection of Civilians, Portuguese Quick Reaction Force, Special Operations, MINUSCA

Resumo

Em 2017, após um drástico aumento da violência na República Centro-Africana (RCA), o Conselho de Segurança das Nações Unidas decidiu desdobrar uma Força de Reação Rápida (QRF) dentro da estrutura da Missão Multidimensional Integrada de Estabilização das Nações

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Nesse contexto, o objetivo desta pesquisa foi analisar o papel desempenhado pela QRF portuguesa como uma unidade de operações especiais, bem como sua contribuição para a proteção de civis (POC) na RCA. Metodologicamente, este estudo consistiu em um estudo de caso de métodos mistos sobre a QRF da MINUSCA, no qual os dados e a análise quantitativos desempenharam um papel secundário em apoio aos dados e à análise qualitativos. Como resultado, foi possível concluir que os comandos portugueses contribuíram efetivamente para a redução da violência física contra civis por meio da realização de tarefas de POC voltadas para o curto prazo. No entanto, como a QRF portuguesa não realizou tarefas de POC voltadas para o longo prazo, sua contribuição foi insuficiente para estabelecer um ambiente seguro na República Centro-Africana.

Palavras-chave: *Proteção de Civis, Força de Reação Rápida Portuguesa, Operações Especiais, MINUSCA*

1. Introduction

Affected by numerous coups and countercoups, the Central African Republic (CAR) has been unstable since its emancipation from France in 1960. Within this context, following a coup led by the Séléka, a predominantly Muslim rebel group, the situation in the country worsened considerably since 2013. Anti-Balaka groups, which are Christian militias, retaliated, and the dispute over power and territory between Séléka and Anti-Balaka factions resulted in severe humanitarian chaos in the CAR (Silva, 2018, p. 9).

In December 2013, to stabilize the crisis in the CAR, the African Union (AU) deployed about 5.800 military and police personnel in the scope of the African-Led International Support Mission to the Central African Republic (MISCA²). Moreover, in parallel with MISCA, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) authorized the deployment of Operation Sangaris, a French military mission composed of 1,200 soldiers (Williams, 2020, p. 137). In 2014, due to difficulties in sustaining itself and achieving consistent results, the United Nations (UN) took control over MISCA, and most of its peacekeepers were incorporated by the newly created United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA³) (Williams, 2020, p. 137).

In late 2016, the Sangaris forces left the CAR, creating a significant military vacuum. The departure of Operation Sangaris occurred simultaneously with the withdrawal of the AU-led Regional Task Force on the Lord's Resistance Army (AU RTF LRA), comprised of United States special forces and Ugandan troops, which were hunting the LRA leader Josef Kony in southeast CAR. In addition, neither the Central African Armed Forces (FACA⁴) nor the national police were prepared to replace the French and the American Ugandan troops (Howard et al., 2020, p. 21).

² Mission Internationale de Soutien à la Centrafrique.

³ Mission Multidimensionnelle Intégrée des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Centrafrique.

⁴ Forces Armées Centrafricaines.

Without the deterrent effect of Operation Sangaris and the AU RTF LRA, violence against civilians spiked. MINUSCA, which had been mostly committed to policing tasks, realized the need to shift towards a more robust mission able to directly engage in threat analysis and early-warning systems, as well as use of force to respond to protection incidents effectively (Howard et al., 2020, p. 60). Facing this challenge, MINUSCA adjusted quickly to the new context. Thus, in addition to 900 extra troops in 2017, the UNSC mandated MINUSCA to acquire a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) provided by Portugal (Howard et al., 2020, p. 21). In November of the same year, the mandate renewal emphasized MINUSCA's authority to use force, as Operation Sangaris had used until 2016 (Howard et al., 2020, p. 56).

Considering the enormous technical and tactical requirements, the high readiness condition, and the operational responsibility, Portugal chose to deploy the MINUSCA QRF, corresponding to a Portuguese National Detached Force (FND⁵) and based on a Commando company (Paulino, 2018, p. 25). This decision follows an innovative trend of providing UN robust peacekeeping operations with highly trained special operations units (Silva, 2022, p. 49). In this context, how has the Portuguese QRF contributed to the protection of civilians in the Central African Republic?

Hence, this study aims to analyze the role played by the Portuguese QRF as a special operations unit, as well as its contribution to the protection of civilians (POC) in the Central African Republic. In order to achieve this objective, this research is organized in four stages. First, it examines the conflict in CAR and the implementation of MINUSCA. Then, this article investigates the employment of the Portuguese QRF from its deployment in 2017 until 2022. After that, this study analyzes the impact of the Portuguese QRF on the protection of civilians using different POC indicators. Finally, this article concludes on the effectiveness of the Portuguese QRF in protecting civilians and fulfilling its mission in the CAR.

In the past two decades, the UNSC has attempted to strengthen peacekeeping operations under Chapter VII of the UN Charter (also called robust peacekeeping operations) by providing these missions with adequate means capable of using all necessary force to protect civilians and achieve their mandates. The implementation of special operations units comprising special forces and/or commando troops within the structure of robust peacekeeping operations is part of this ambitious strategy.

Nevertheless, it was not possible to find any work in academic sources that specifically measured the impact of special operations units on the protection of civilians based on POC indicators. Regarding the FND, Portuguese articles and postgraduate studies are limited to examining the factors and conditions that led to the deployment of the Portuguese QRF in the CAR, as well as its preparation and employment in operations. Therefore, this paper is relevant because it analyzes, in the context of the MINUSCA, the actual impact of a special operations unit on the protection of civilians, helping evaluate this innovative UNSC strategy.

⁵ *Força Nacional Destacada.*

2. Background

2.1. The Central African Republic Conflict

Since its emancipation from France, the CAR has struggled with recurrent crises and insurgencies. Ani and Ojakorotu (2021, p. 80) emphasize that the CAR has never been able to establish a centralized system or form of government in more than 60 years as an independent nation. According to the authors, religious identity, which in the CAR is often associated with ethnic identity, helps to divide the country into two major groups: Christians or followers of indigenous beliefs (85% of the population) and Muslims (15% of the population).

Amid so much turmoil, the current and most violent wave of instability began in 2012, when rebels known as Séléka and mainly composed of Muslims, led by Michel Djotodia, marched on the capital city of Bangui (Williams, 2020, p. 137). In addition to CAR citizens, the Séléka recruited militias from Chad and Sudan, dragging regional disputes and interests into the CAR conflict (Isaacs-Martin, 2016, p. 34).

On the government side, Howard et al. (2020, p. 43) highlight the deal for military support between President Bozizé and South Africa, another relevant player at the beginning of the crisis. However, regional and domestic resistance gave in when the FACA collapsed in March 2013. As a result, with support from Chad, Djotodia installed himself as head of the CAR.

Although Djotodia managed to overthrow Bozizé, the rebel leader could not control the many groups that made up the Séléka. In this regard, Séléka commanders ruled conquered cities and towns according to their interests, perpetrating widespread looting and atrocities against the majority Christian population (Carayannis & Fowlis, 2017, p. 224). This behavior stimulated the formation of self-defense militias known as Anti-Balaka, which sought revenge by attacking both military targets and civilians perceived as Muslims (Williams, 2020, p. 137).

Carayannis and Fowlis (2017, p. 224) argue that the AU paid little attention to the CAR crisis until mid-2013, when it became clear that the regional organization had to intervene. By that time, the sub-regional Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) had deployed the Mission of the Economic Community of Central African States in the Central African Republic (MICOPAX) without success. Thus, the AU turned the MICOPAX into the MISCA and increased its military component.

Furthermore, alongside the French Operation Sangaris, the UNSC Resolution 2127 (2013) authorized the MISCA to stabilize the country by ensuring the protection of civilians, restoration of order, creation of space for humanitarian assistance, and support for the processes of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), as well as security sector reform (SSR) (Carayannis & Fowlis, 2017, p. 224).

Operation Sangaris, comprised of 1,200 troops, was deployed in December 2013. As an intervention force, Sangaris' desired end state was not to create lasting peace, but to hand over operations to an international force after decreased violence levels (Heméz, 2016, p. 78). Moreover, in the eastern part of the CAR, where the French operation was not deployed, US special forces and Ugandan infantry troops in the hunt for the LRA also worked as a deterrent force, even though they did not have a stabilization mandate (Howard, 2019, p. 161).

Despite the new UNSC Resolution and the creation of MISCA alongside Operation Sangaris, the humanitarian situation in the CAR worsened abruptly in the second semester of 2013. By mid-January 2014, about one-fifth of the civilian population (900,000 people) had been internally displaced or had sought refuge in neighboring countries, half of the total population (2.6 million people) needed humanitarian aid, and 60% of the families did not have food stocks available (Arieff, 2014, p. 28).

Despised by the Christian population, unable to control rogue Séléka groups, and under tremendous international pressure because of the humanitarian chaos, Djotodia resigned in January 2014 (Waugh, 2014, p. 13). The rebel leader was replaced by a transitional government led by the Christian Catherine Samba-Panza, the former mayor of the capital Bangui (Silva, 2018, p. 9).

The arrangement between the AU and Operation Sangaris proved unsuccessful and biased. According to Howard et al. (2020, p. 43), the French intervention force sided with Anti-Balaka groups and began the unilateral disarming of the Séléka. Williams (2020, p. 137) corroborates the partiality of Operation Sangaris towards Anti-Balaka groups, which contrasted with the explicit support from some MISCA contingents to the Séléka. In this sense, the Chad contingent was expelled from MISCA after firing into a crowd of Christians, killing 24 civilians and injuring more than one hundred.

Furthermore, despite Djotodia's resignation, the transitional government faced a new challenge. After the Séléka's removal from power in January 2014, the groups morphed into many factions commonly known as ex-Séléka. According to Pham et al. (2020, p. 379), the disintegration of the Séléka in several ex-Séléka armed groups has prevented the CAR government from regaining control over most of the country's territory.

2.2 The Creation of the MINUSCA and the need for a QRF

Considering the catastrophic situation on the ground and evident difficulties for the AU to sustain itself in the CAR, the UNSC decided to intervene directly by transforming MISCA into MINUSCA under Resolution 2149 (2014). Thus, in April 2014, the UNSC set 15 September 2014 as the handover date and authorized a peacekeeping force comprised of 12,000 personnel (Carayannis & Fowles, 2017, p. 227; Williams, 2020, p. 138). Implemented under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the highest priority established for the MINUSCA was the protection of civilians. The mission was also tasked with supporting the transition process; facilitating the delivery of humanitarian assistance; promoting and protecting human rights; supporting justice and the rule of law; and ensuring the disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, and repatriation process (Silva, 2018, p. 9).

Between 2015 and 2016, most of MINUSCA's efforts went into guaranteeing presidential and legislative elections. As a major accomplishment, MINUSCA ended the period of political transition by facilitating and monitoring the democratic election of the mathematics professor from the University of Bangui and former Prime Minister Faustin Touadéra, who was sworn in as President in March 2016 (Williams, 2020, p. 138).

In this same period, Howard (2019, p. 130) and Howard et al. (2020, p. 60) draw attention to the fact that military tasks were performed mainly by troops from France, the United States, and Uganda. In this regard, Sangaris played a prominent role by conducting air and ground military operations to respond to protection incidents. On the other hand, under police command, MINUSCA's military battalions focused on policing actions to protect civilians. Under this division of tasks, between 2014 and 2016, the authors claim that rebel groups stood down, civilian deaths dropped, the population elected a new president, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) reduced, and the economy began to restart.

As an extremely negative point, international forces, including Sangaris and UN peacekeepers, allegedly became involved in sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA). According to Howard et al. (2020, p. 108), even before the deployment of MINUSCA, French soldiers had been regularly abusing young Central Africans at the IDP camp located at the Bangui airport, where water and food were exchanged for sex. Regarding the MINUSCA, 22 allegations of SEA against local civilians were reported only in 2015. As a result, the UN Secretary-General forced the head of MINUSCA, general Babacar Gaye, to resign. Moreover, battalions from the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of Congo, and Senegal were removed from MINUSCA.

Howard (2019, p. 148) agrees that French troops made serious mistakes early in their intervention, including the allegations of SEA against young Central Africans. Nevertheless, after they corrected their course, the author asserts that Sangaris was able to stabilize the country using force and deterrence. Thus, the UNSC strategy of using MINUSCA and the French intervention force performing complementary roles was effective in the CAR.

However, following the election of President Touadéra, France announced the withdrawal of Operation Sangaris. On 30 October 2016, the French intervention force completed its departure from the country. In addition, in early 2017, President Trump from the United States ended the hunt for the LRA in the CAR for budgetary reasons. In this context, both American special forces and Ugandan troops left the country (Howard, 2019, p. 160). Hence, the CAR lost the two most important deterrents against armed groups (Howard, 2019, p. 139).

As soon as the French forces withdrew from the CAR, Howard (2019, p. 169) recalls that the city of Bria succumbed to violence while peacekeepers remained in their bases. The author affirms that MINUSCA troops had taken on the Sangaris tasks but did not have the capability or willingness to use compelling force. In this same direction, Bellamy and Hunt (2021, p. 156) assert that MINUSCA failed to respond to an attack on IDPs in Kaga Bandoro. Consequently, dozens of civilians were killed, and thousands sought refuge in UN bases.

According to Zimmerman (2020, p. 9), when violence spiraled up at the end of 2016, MINUSCA was required to take a more offensive posture. In this sense, Karlsrud (2015, p. 43) argues that the new mandates for UN peacekeeping missions oriented towards stabilization, such as in the CAR, demand a high level of robust use of force. Gilder (2021, p. 214) agrees with Karlsrud by emphasizing that the MINUSCA mandate includes the protection of the population through the robust use of force.

Nonetheless, at the beginning of 2017, the issue of underperformance had already become notorious among MINUSCA troops. Taking advantage of this situation, armed groups performed a series of attacks against civilians, humanitarian workers, and UN personnel (Goulart, 2021, p. 43). Additionally, the brutal rebel group LRA reemerged in the east of the country, originating from northern Uganda (Pham et al., 2020, p. 379).

Given the worsening scenario in the CAR and the overstretching commitment of French troops in the entire Sahara-Sahel area, Paulino (2018, p. 25) states that France required the European Union (EU) to increase the deployment of European troops in the region. Responding to the French request, the Portuguese Supreme Council of National Defense approved the participation of a national contingent in MINUSCA, through a land maneuver unit of company size (Lomba, 2019, p. 24).

In this context, Portugal agreed to provide the MINUSCA QRF able to conduct military operations in a volatile, unpredictable, and complex conflict zone. After analyzing the risks and the challenges of that operational environment, the Iberian country decided to deploy a Portuguese National Detached Force, composed of a Commando company, as the mission QRF (Silva, 2022, p. 49).

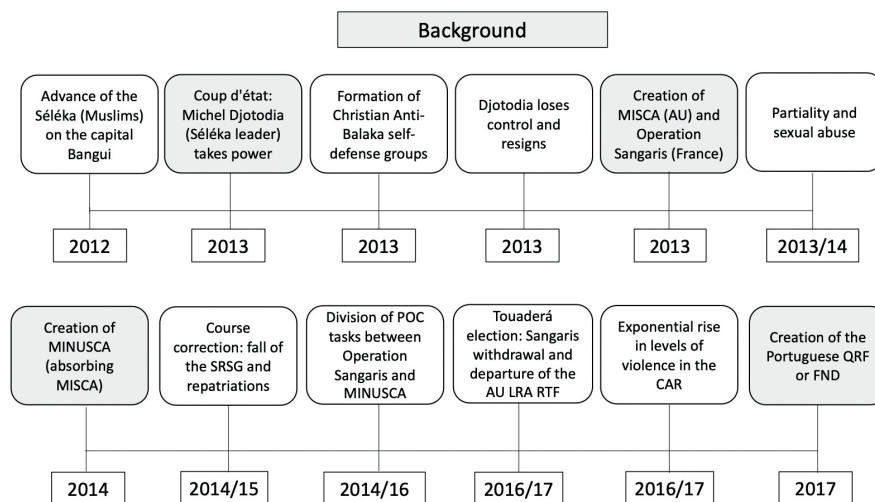


Figure 1 – Background timeline in the Central African Republic

3. Research Methods

Methodologically, this paper combined qualitative and quantitative data in a mixed-methods case study. Also, this research was structured on an embedded design, in which qualitative data collection and analysis played a prominent role. Thus, the quantitative data collection and analysis provided a supporting argument for this study, helping to enhance, clarify, and illustrate the results obtained by the qualitative research (Creswell & Plano Clarke, 2007, p. 91).

The hypothesis that guided this study is: the employment of the Portuguese Quick Reaction Force significantly increases MINUSCA's capability of protecting civilians in the Central African Republic. In this context, the employment of the Portuguese Quick Reaction Force emerges as the independent variable since it directly affects the dependent variable: the MINUSCA's capability of protecting civilians in the Central African Republic.

To analyze the independent variable, the employment of the Portuguese Quick Reaction Force, it is paramount to understand the expected role to be performed by this specialized troop. In this regard, the UN doctrine establishes that trained infantry troops are more suitable to perform quick reaction forces. Conversely, it is also recommended that special operations units form the advanced element of a stronger QRF, with support from helicopters and conventional infantry or light armored troops (United Nations, 2015, p. 21). In the case of MINUSCA, Portugal decided to deploy commando contingents as QRF due to the high risk posed by the operational environment, which includes a series of hostile armed groups. Given the nature of the Portuguese commandos, this research analyzes the role played by the QRF in accordance with the expected POC tasks to be performed by special operations units deployed in robust peacekeeping operations.

In this context, after analyzing the mandates of all UN operations under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, Silva (2022, p. 53) identifies the POC tasks assigned to the military contingents deployed in these robust peacekeeping operations. Among them, the author points out those most suitable for special operations by comparing the principal special operations missions fixed by the UN doctrine and the POC tasks customarily assigned to special operations units deployed in UN robust peacekeeping operations. This comparison can be summarized by the table below:

Table 1 – POC tasks associated with special operations missions

Special Operations missions	POC tasks
Special Tasks	Neutralize actors who pose imminent threat to civilians
	Capture weapons or members of armed groups who pose imminent threat to civilians
	Respond to threats or attacks on civilians, including UN personnel, UN associates, and humanitarian actors
Special Reconnaissance	Establish surveillance and monitoring on possible threats to civilians
Military Assistance	Provide expertise, advice, and training to local defense/security forces
	Provide expertise, advice, and training to UN conventional troops

Source: adapted from Silva (2022).

In this research, the principal special operations missions represented the dimensions of the independent variable, while the POC tasks associated with them corresponded to the indicators of these dimensions (see table 1).

Concerning the analysis of the dependent variable, the MINUSCA's capability of protecting civilians in the Central African Republic, this research used POC indicators listed in the United Nations Handbook on Protection of Civilians (United Nations, 2020). Hence, the parameters selected were violent deaths, sexual violence by armed groups, deaths by state forces, clashes between armed groups, and IDP population. These indicators were grouped into two dimensions within this variable: physical violence against civilians and establishment of a safe environment (see table 2).

Regarding the data collection techniques, this case study used bibliographic research, documental research, and interviews to obtain qualitative data. The bibliographic research helped to understand the CAR conflict and the factors that triggered the implementation of the Portuguese QRF. The documental research focused on comprehending the United Nations special operations doctrine and the Portuguese QRF tasks, structure, and employment in the CAR.

Furthermore, five semi-structured interviews were conducted via videoconference and stored in audio files with the consent of the interviewees. The target audience consisted of MINUSCA and European Union Training Mission (EUTM) personnel deployed in the mission between 2018 and 2022, including three EUTM mentors, two of whom are special forces operators, a staff officer of the MINUSCA Joint Operations Center (JOC), and a Portuguese QRF commander. The impressions provided by these mission experts reinforced the results obtained by other collection methods, contributing to the precise understanding of the role played by the Portuguese QRF in the CAR and its impact on the POC.

Moreover, database and documental research provided the quantitative data for this study. To complement the qualitative research, the quantitative data focused on the POC indicators selected to analyze the dependent variable. In addition to that, the quantitative data collected from the databases of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), as well as reports from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), underwent statistical treatment. At first, descriptive statics helped better comprehend the numbers related to each one of the POC indicators. As a second step, by using the Pearson's correlation coefficient, inferential statistics established the correlation between the POC indicators to verify whether the POC results changes since the Portuguese QRF deployment were not random. This research used Microsoft Excel to treat numerical data for descriptive and inferential statistics.

The table below presents the operational view of the hypothesis, containing its variables, dimensions, indicators and data collection methods used in this study.

Table 2 – Operational View of the Hypothesis

Independent Variable	Dimensions	Indicators	Data Collection Methods
The employment of the Portuguese QRF	Special Tasks	Neutralization of threats	- Interviews - Bibliographic research - Documental research
		Capture of weapons or members of armed groups	
		Response to threats or attacks on civilians	
	Special Reconnaissance	Surveillance and monitoring on possible threats	
	Military Assistance	Provision of expertise, advice, and training to local defense/security forces	
Provide	Provide	Provision of expertise, advice, and training to UM conventional troops	
Independent Variable	Dimensions	Indicators	Data Collection Methods
MINUSCA's capability of protecting civilians in the CAR	Physical Violence Against Civilians	Violent Deaths in the CAR	- Interviews - Bibliographic research - Documental research - Database research
		Sexual Violence by Armed Groups in the CAR	
		Deaths by State Forces	
	Establishment of a Safe Environment	Clashes Between Armed Groups in the CAR	
		IDPs in the CAR	

In this research, the object of study was the Portuguese QRF. In terms of content, this article covered the employment of this specialized troop, as well as its impact on the protection of civilians. With regard to the delimitation of time, the research included data from 2012 to 2022, with only qualitative data for the last two years. Finally, this study was geographically delimited to the territory of the CAR.

4. The Employment of the Portuguese QRF

The Portuguese QRF was transported from Lisbon to Bangui between 7 and 23 January 2017. On 15 February, the FND reached full operational capability (FOC). Concerning the structure of the QRF, in addition to the Commando company, the FND comprises staff from the Portuguese Commando battalion and support personnel from several Army and Air Force units (Paulino, 2018, p. 25; United Nations, 2017a, p. 13). Normally, 180 personnel belong to the FND (Exército Português, 2019, p. 4).

According to the United Nations (2016, p. 4), the primary purpose of the mission QRF is to assist in-place UN forces. Moreover, due to its characteristics, the FND is required to provide deterrence and respond decisively to threats and attacks on the population and UN personnel/assets. In addition to its primary purpose, the FND is tasked to conduct intelligence

gathering and surveillance operations; reconnaissance operations; reactive response to an evolving crisis; extraction/rescue operations; and direct attack helicopter fire.

Therefore, the commando nature of the QRF troops and the tasks received by the FND in the context of MINUSCA indicates that the Portuguese QRF has been employed as a special operations unit. To confirm this assertion, this research compares the role played by the FND in the CAR to the three principal special operations missions under the UN doctrine: Special Tasks, Special Reconnaissance, and Military Assistance.

4.1 Special Tasks

Within the UN doctrine for special operations, Special Tasks are defined as precise operations limited in scope and duration, carried out with minimum collateral damage to acquire, disrupt, neutralize, recover, or disable assigned high-value and high-pay-off objectives. Moreover, Special Tasks are directed to objectives of strategic and operational significance, as well as decisive tactical objectives (United Nations, 2015, p. 18). In the context of robust peacekeeping operations, Special Tasks usually include, with or without the support from conventional blue helmets, three POC tasks: neutralize actors who pose imminent threat to civilians; capture weapons or members of armed groups who pose imminent threat to civilians; and respond to threats or attacks on civilians, including UN personnel, UN associates, and humanitarian actors (Silva, 2022, p. 53).

Concerning the abovementioned POC tasks, responding to threats or attacks on civilians is the one that fits the Portuguese QRF the most. In addition to being stated as part of its primary purpose, the QRF has been constantly employed to fulfill this task since it arrived in the CAR. Nevertheless, in the context of strengthening operations in a given MINUSCA Sector or being a first intervention force in hostile zones throughout the country, the QRF has been occasionally used to neutralize armed groups and to capture weapons or members of armed groups in the CAR (J. Pereira, face-to-face interview, 22 February 2022).

As a former commander Portuguese commander in the CAR, Paulino (2018, p. 26) agrees with this assertion and describes the first QRF operation in 2017. According to the author, after establishing a temporary operational base (TOB) in the city of Bambari, the Portuguese commandos carried out raids to locate and neutralize armed groups. Moreover, several times during this operation, the FND exchanged fire with hostile armed groups to protect themselves and civilians in that area.

Regarding the QRF operation in Bambari, the United Nations (2017b) affirms that, before the arrival of the Portuguese commandos, the city was occupied by an ex-Séléka faction called Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (UPC). After defeating the rebels in Bambari, the Portuguese QRF directed helicopter fire against UPC bunkers and shelters. As a result, the prominent UPC leaders were captured by the QRF, and the remaining rebels fled the region.

A few weeks after the expelling of the UPC, Anti-Balaka militias such as the Popular Front for the Rebirth of Central African Republic (PFRC) attempted to take over the city of Bambari. As a response, the Portuguese commandos surprised the rebels by raiding against Anti-Balaka groups stationed in the area. At the end of the operation, the QRF had neutralized

dozens of rebels and captured three main PFRC leaders. In this regard, UN entities and the MINUSCA paid great recognition to the Portuguese actions at the beginning of 2017. The blue helmets showed initiative and defeated hostile armed groups in the CAR for the first time (Paulino, 2017, pp. 17-18). Furthermore, after the Portuguese operations in Bambari, the second-largest city in the country became a Weapons Free Zone in accordance with the MINUSCA's evaluation (United Nations, 2017a).

Paulino (2018, p. 27) also describes a QRF operation in the city of Alindao. On this occasion, the Portuguese commandos were conducting a reconnaissance patrol in that area when the local Bishop requested help. When the QRF entered the city, an ex-Séléka group was carrying out a violent attack against non-Muslim civilians. Using robust force, the Portuguese commandos established a security perimeter around the local cathedral and sheltered more than 20,000 people, resisting the rebels' attacks for five days until replacement. As soon as the replacement took place, the Portuguese QRF departed immediately to the city of Bangassou, where UN conventional troops were under attack, and five blue helmets had already lost their lives.

Upon arrival in Bangassou, attesting that the conventional peacekeepers were not prepared to fight the Anti-Balaka rebels, the Portuguese commandos decided to act alone to retake control of the city. With the support of a helicopter MI-35, the QRF established security of critical locations such as the city's cathedral, mosque, hospital, and evacuation routes for the Muslim population under attack. According to Paulino (2018, p. 28), in addition to saving hundreds of civilians, the courage and posture of the Portuguese commandos inspired the conventional blue helmets. In this sense, after 48 hours of combat, the QRF was joined by the UN troops that were previously deployed in Bangassou.

Thus, in the scope of Special Tasks, the Portuguese QRF regularly responds to threats or attacks against civilians. In fact, this has been the main POC task performed by the FND (A. Lima, face-to-face interview, 10 January 2022). Eventually, even though those tasks are not explicitly stated by the MINUSCA Force Headquarters, the QRF has also neutralized and captured members of armed groups by using the rules of engagement and aiming at protecting civilians under imminent threat (P. Uchôa, face-to-face interview, 3 December 2021). Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the Portuguese commandos have been performing all POC tasks associated with Special Tasks.

4.2 Special Reconnaissance

According to the United Nations special operations doctrine, Special Reconnaissance are operations carried out to collect or verify information of strategic or operational significance. Typically, Special Reconnaissance operations are directed to places where terrain masking, hostile countermeasures, weather, or unavailability of other systems impose constraints. Hence, special operations forces use military capabilities not found in conventional troops to complement other intelligence collection methods. As a result, Special Reconnaissance operations provide specific, well-defined, and time-sensitive information to support the decision-making process at the topmost level of a UN mission (United Nations, 2015, p. 17). Considering robust peacekeeping operations, the POC task associated with Special

Reconnaissance is to establish surveillance and monitoring on possible threats to civilians (Silva, 2022, p. 54).

In the CAR, intelligence gathering and surveillance operations belong to the list of tasks assigned to the QRF (United Nations, 2016). In this regard, Karlsrud (2015, p. 49) argues that the UN mandate for the CAR and other missions, such as the DRC and Mali, reflect a trend to conduct operations based on intelligence gathering and analysis. The author also highlights the use of special operations forces as a reliable intelligence collection asset among intelligence sources.

Moreover, even though Special Reconnaissance is not explicitly listed as a task to be conducted by the QRF, the Portuguese commandos use Special Reconnaissance tactics, techniques, and procedures to conduct long-range reconnaissance, establish surveillance, and collect intelligence in support of the UN mission (J. Pereira, face-to-face interview, 22 February 2022). Also, notably in known hostile places or where there is no information regarding the possibilities of the armed groups, MINUSCA has usually tasked the QRF to conduct reconnaissance operations to obtain valuable data on these irregular forces. This is mostly because of the Portuguese commandos' capabilities that override those of conventional forces (A. Lima, face-to-face interview, 10 January 2022).

Therefore, in the context of MINUSCA, it is possible to affirm that the Portuguese QRF has been employed to conduct the POC task of establishing surveillance and monitoring on possible threats to civilians.

4.3 Military Assistance

The United Nations special operations doctrine establishes that Military Assistance consists of activities directed to support and influence friendly assets through organized training, advising, and mentoring. Furthermore, Military Assistance in the scope of robust peacekeeping operations aims at two main targets: host nation defense/security forces and UN conventional troops. Thus, Military Assistance can be associated with two special operations POC tasks: provide expertise, advice, and training to local defense/security forces; and provide expertise, advice, and training to UN conventional troops (Silva, 2022, p. 55).

In the CAR, the Portuguese QRF is not involved with Military Assistance. After an agreement between MINUSCA, the UN, and the European Union, the EUTM, composed of eight member states, has received the task of providing Military Assistance to the FACA in the context of the security sector reform (United Nations, 2021). More recently, Russia has also started to train the FACA, especially in using heavy Russian weapons supplied to the CAR. By 2022, the Russians had already established 43 bases composed of 40-100 military and ex-military personnel in different locations of the country (F. Mendes, face-to-face interview, 15 November 2022). Until 2020, about 8,000 FACA troops, including 619 women, had undergone EUTM and/or Russian training programs. Furthermore, 1,400 trained soldiers had been deployed to 20 different locations in the country (Howard et al., 2020, p. 71).

Therefore, the QRF has not been employed to conduct Military Assistance in the CAR. However, unlike other countries where robust peacekeeping operations are deployed,

European and Russian mentors have provided Military Assistance to at least 8,000 FACA troops, contributing to the SSR process.

4.4 Analysis of the High Readiness Company's Employment

According to the UN doctrine, the Portuguese QRF has performed two principal special operations missions: Special Tasks and Special Reconnaissance. Hence, considering the six POC tasks linked to special operations capabilities, the FND has carried out four. For this reason, it is possible to affirm that the Portuguese QRF has been doctrinarily employed as a special operations asset by the MINUSCA, however, with limitations. Moreover, Lopes (2020, p. 33) affirms that there is a tendency to assign tasks to the FND that are not suitable for a QRF, such as presence patrols. This also undermines the use of the FND as special operations troops. The following table summarizes the special operations missions and tasks conducted by the FND:

Table 3 – Portuguese QRF employment in the Central African Republic

Special Operations missions	POC tasks	Yes/No
Special Tasks	Neutralize actors who pose imminent threat to civilians	Yes
	Capture weapons or members of armed groups who pose imminent threat to civilians	Yes
	Respond to threats or attacks on civilians, including UN personnel, UN associates, and humanitarian actors	Yes
Special Reconnaissance	Establish surveillance and monitoring on possible threats to civilians	Yes
Military Assistance	Provide expertise, advice, and training to local defense/security forces	No
	Provide expertise, advice, and training to UN conventional troops	No

By conducting Special Reconnaissance and Special Tasks in the CAR, the Portuguese QRF has obtained not only a physical but also a psychological advantage over hostile armed groups (U. Marcondes, face-to-face interview, 7 November 2022). In addition to the operations in Bambari, Alindao, and Bangassou, Kabatanya (2020) highlights the highly positive effects against armed groups secured by the QRF operations in Bocaranga and Bouar. Moreover, following the MINUSCA's mandate renewal in November 2019, which gave the mission legal authority to enforce the peace agreement, the FND has deployed several times to curb armed group aggression (Howard et al., 2020, p. 82).

Thus, the Portuguese commandos have become the most valuable deterrent asset within the MINUSCA (U. Marcondes, face-to-face interview, 7 November 2022). This statement can be confirmed by examining the behavior of armed groups toward the Portuguese QRF. In this regard, when the QRF arrives in a hostile or conflict area to respond to threats or attacks on civilians, the armed groups have often fled to other places to avoid contact with the Portuguese commandos (J. Pereira, face-to-face interview, 22 February 2022).

On the other hand, the Portuguese QRF has not conducted Military Assistance in the CAR. This is because the FND is not required by the mandate to carry out such activity, and the EUTM is already deployed in the CAR for this purpose. In general, the SSR process has been a challenge given that armed groups still hold most of the ground in the CAR and tax people residing in the areas under their control. However, there has been slow progress considering the support provided by the EUTM and, more recently, the Russian forces to the FACA (Howard et al., 2020, p. 22).

5. The Contribution of the Portuguese QRF to the Protection of Civilians in the Central African Republic

The Department of Peace Operations (DPO) has established the POC Operational Concept to guide the implementation of the protection of civilians in UN peacekeeping operations. The POC Operational Concept is based on three tiers: protection through (political) dialogue and engagement; provision of physical protection; and establishment of a protective (or safe) environment. The DPO also emphasizes that the three tiers are equally important and must be implemented simultaneously. Moreover, while Tier 1 (protection through dialogue and engagement) and Tier 3 (establishment of a protective or safe environment) comprise activities more focused on the long-term outcomes, Tier 2 (provision of physical protection) aims at short-term results (United Nations, 2020, p. 12).

Furthermore, the POC mandate is conducted in four phases: prevention, pre-emption, response, and consolidation. As well as the three tiers of the POC Operational Concept, the DPO stresses that the four phases are not mutually exclusive and commonly overlap. Most of the time, the prevention and consolidation phases take place when the security environment is relatively stable, and the threats to civilians are distant, unlikely, or subsiding. Thus, the prevention and consolidation phases aim to address the conflict's root causes and are more associated with Tier 1 and Tier 3 activities. Conversely, pre-emption and response phases occur when the environment is unstable, and violence against civilians is frequent or highly likely. Hence, the pre-emption and response phases focus on the immediate causes of the conflict and are more linked to Tier 2 activities (United Nations, 2020, p. 138).

Gilder (2021, p. 214) corroborates the UN POC strategy by affirming that UN robust peacekeeping operations have two main objectives. In the short term, they engage armed groups to disorganize them and create a deterrent effect. In a second moment, aiming at the long term, these UN operations undertake peacebuilding activities to re-establish state authority and legitimacy. Therefore, the author explains that the stabilization of a conflict zone is achieved using robust force by UN troops, followed by civilian-led peacebuilding activities.

Considering the POC Operational Concept, special operations POC tasks can be directly associated with Tier 2 and Tier 3 activities. While the POC tasks linked to Special Tasks require robust use of force in the short term and, therefore, can be classified as Tier 2 activities, Military Assistance aims at building local capacity and enhance the UN troops' performance in the long term. For this reason, Military Assistance can be associated with Tier 3 activities. Finally, Special Reconnaissance produces intelligence that contributes to all three tiers. However, as

the POC task of establishing surveillance and monitoring on possible threats have a significant impact on the support of Special Tasks against armed groups, Special Reconnaissance in robust peacekeeping operations has a more noticeable contribution to Tier 2 activities.

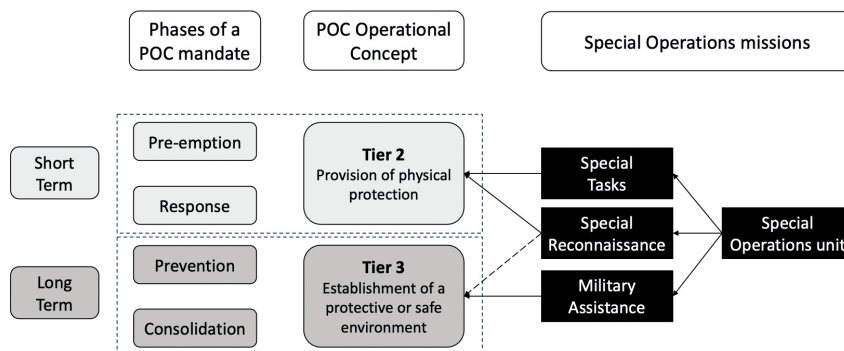


Figure 2 – Interrelationship between special operations units and POC in UN peacekeeping operations

Therefore, considering that the effect of special operations units deployed in robust peacekeeping operations is more perceivable in Tier 2 and Tier 3 activities, the indicators selected for the analysis of the Portuguese QRF's impact on the protection of civilians in the CAR are divided into two dimensions: physical violence against civilians and establishment of a safe environment.

5.1 Physical violence against civilians

The United Nations considers that physical violence against civilians includes all kinds of direct and indiscriminate attacks targeting civilians. It also encompasses attacks that do not make a distinction between combatants and civilians. The main actions involved in this type of violence are killing, torturing, raping, forcibly displacing, starving, kidnapping, trafficking persons, abducting, arbitrarily detaining, maiming, recruiting children, and harming civilians through the existence of mines, explosive remnants of war, and improvised explosive devices. Moreover, the main perpetrators of violence against civilians are non-state groups, host state security and defense forces, foreign state security forces, self-defense groups, inter-communal violence, and organized criminal groups. In this research, the indicators selected to evaluate the physical violence against civilians in the CAR are the number of violent deaths, sexual violence by armed groups, and deaths by state forces.

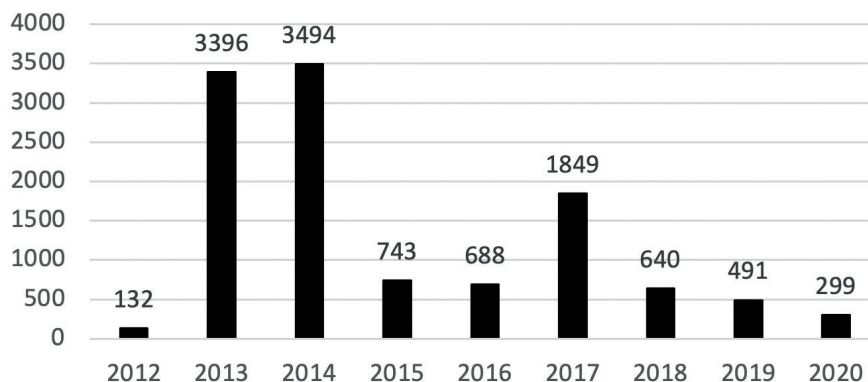


Figure 3 – Violent deaths in the Central African Republic

Source: adapted from Uppsala University (2022).

After reaching the highest level in 2014, the number of violent deaths has a substantial decrease by 78.73% in 2015. In 2017, there is an increase of 168.75%, followed by another relevant reduction of 65.39% in 2018. Since then, the numbers decrease gradually from 2018 to 2020, reaching 299 in 2020. Between 2012 and 2020, the average number of violent deaths in the CAR is 1,303.55.

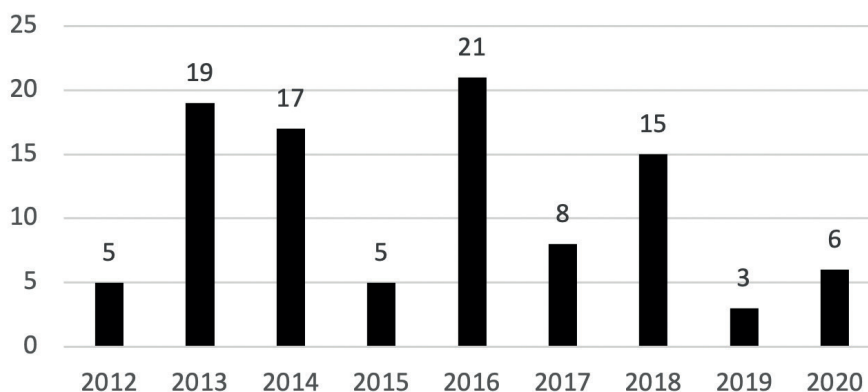


Figure 4 – Sexual violence by armed groups in the Central African Republic

Source: adapted from ACLED (2022).

The reported numbers associated with sexual violence by armed groups in the CAR rise from 5 in 2012 to 19 and then 17 in 2013 and 2014, respectively. In 2015, the numbers drop by 70.59%, reaching the same pre-conflict level. In 2016, there is a new growth of 320% in sexual violence by armed groups, followed by a decrease of 61.9% in 2017. After growing again in 2018, the numbers drop one more time in 2019 and 2020, reaching the 2012 and 2016 levels. The average number of sexual violence by armed groups in the CAR from 2012 to 2020 is 11.

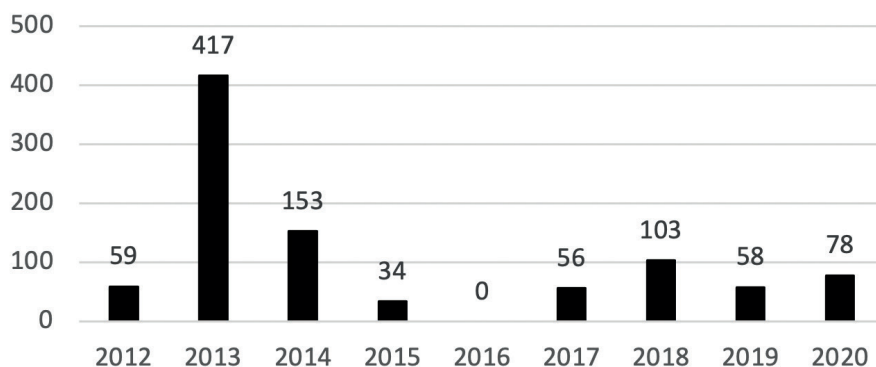


Figure 5 – Deaths by state forces in the Central African Republic

Source: adapted from Uppsala University (2022).

After a massive increase of 606.68% from 2012 to 2013, the deaths by state forces drop consistently from 2013 to 2016 until reaching zero. From 2016 to 2018, there is a gradual growth in deaths by state forces, reaching 103 deaths in 2018. Between 2018 and 2020, the numbers drop by 24.27%. From 2012 to 2020, the average number of deaths by state forces in the CAR is 106.44.

5.2 Analysis of physical violence against civilians

Firstly, before analyzing the reasons for the variations in the POC indicators associated with physical violence against civilians, this research verified the correlation between them. Thus, the following scatterplots help determine whether the variations in the POC indicators are correlated or if they occur randomly.

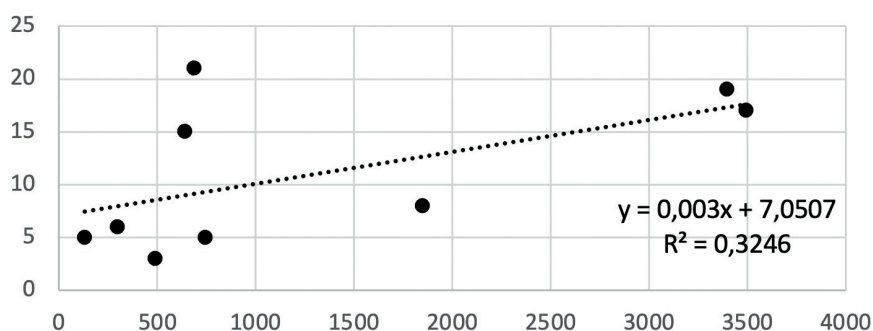


Figure 6 – Violent deaths x Sexual violence by armed groups scatterplot

Note: this graph shows the degree of relationship between violent deaths and sexual violence by armed groups. The R^2 (coefficient of determination) equals 0,3246 or 32.46%. The regression line of this correlation is obtained by the equation: $y = 0.003x + 7.0507$.

Figure 6 shows that in 32.46% (equivalent to r^2) of the time, violent deaths and sexual violence by armed groups vary accordingly. In this case, the correlation coefficient ($\sqrt{r^2}$) or Pearson's r) equals 0.57, indicating a moderate positive correlation between both indicators. Nevertheless, for an alpha of 0.05, the p-value for this correlation is 0.1093. As $0.1093 > 0.05$, this correlation is not statistically significant.

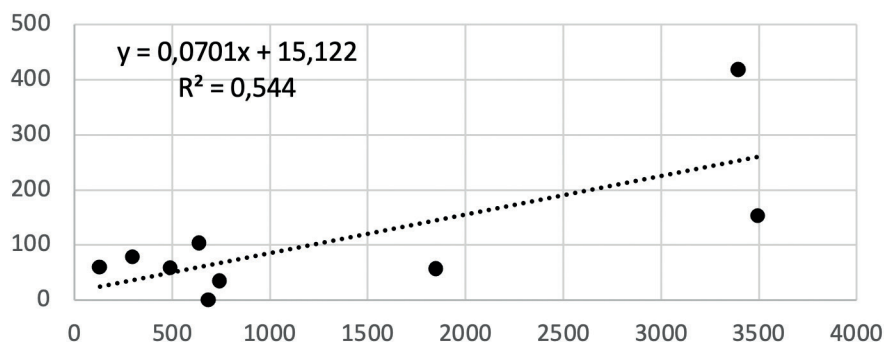


Figure 7 – Violent deaths x Deaths by state forces scatterplot

Note: this graph shows the degree of relationship between violent deaths and sexual violence by armed groups. The R^2 (coefficient of determination) equals 0,544 or 54.4%. The regression line of this correlation is obtained by the equation: $y = 0.0701x + 15.122$.

Regarding the relation between violent deaths and deaths by state forces, figure 7 demonstrates that both POC indicators vary accordingly 54.4% of the time. For these POC indicators, the correlation coefficient equals 0.74, which is a strong positive correlation. Moreover, considering an alpha of 0.05, the p-value for this correlation is 0.0233. Since $0.0233 < 0.05$, this positive correlation can be considered statistically significant.

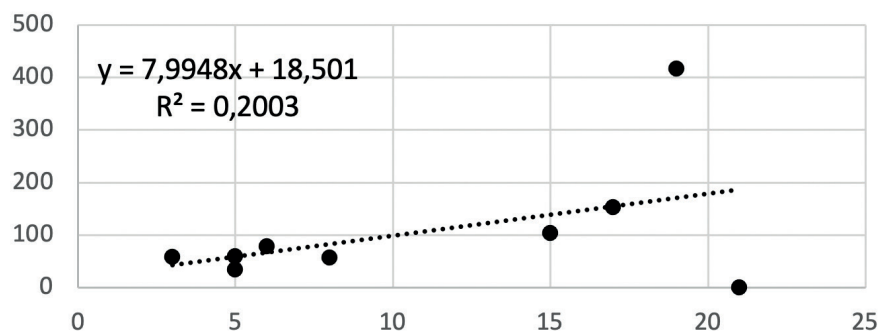


Figure 8 – Sexual violence by armed groups x Deaths by state forces scatterplot

Note: this graph shows the degree of relationship between violent deaths and sexual violence by armed groups. The R^2 (coefficient of determination) equals 0,2003 or 20.03%. The regression line of this correlation is obtained by the equation: $y = 7.9948x + 18.501$.

In compliance with Figure 8, sexual violence by armed groups and deaths by state forces vary accordingly 20.03% of the time. Hence, the correlation coefficient between these two POC indicators equals 0.45, meaning a moderate positive correlation. Nonetheless, for an alpha of 0.05, the p-value for this correlation is 0.2270. In this case, as $0.2270 > 0.05$, it is not possible to conclude that this positive correlation is statistically significant.

Therefore, as the first and the third correlation tests are not statistically significant, it is not possible to affirm that the employment of the Portuguese QRF has the same effects on all three POC indicators associated with physical violence against civilians. However, it is possible to assert that violent deaths and deaths by state forces have a statistically significant strong positive correlation. Thus, the changes vary accordingly in two of the three POC indicators. Moreover, even in the case of sexual violence, the numbers related to these three POC indicators show some important similarities that allow conclusions to be drawn. In this sense, the following paragraphs aim at demonstrating the cause-consequence relationship between the UN strategy and changes in POC indicators, focusing on the employment of the Portuguese QRF in the CAR.

Initially, POC indicators show that violence against civilians spiked in 2013 and 2014. In 2015, all indicators revealed that violence dropped consistently. Howard et al. (2020, p. 62) explain this phenomenon by arguing that this decrease occurred because of Operation Sangaris's arrival and the MINUSCA's implementation. According to the authors, the combination of the UN peacekeeping operation and Operation Sangaris, which worked as a deterrent asset able to use force to support the MINUSCA, resulted in a dramatic decline in violence in the CAR.

In late 2016 and 2017, the withdrawal of Operation Sangaris allowed an escalation of violence. Moreover, the exit of American special forces and Ugandan infantry troops from southeast CAR due to budget cuts by the American government also contributed to the rise of violence in the country. However, the implementation of the Portuguese QRF throughout the year 2017 influenced positively the violence figures starting from 2018, especially concerning violent deaths (Howard et al., 2020, p. 92).

As shown by the correlation tests, it is vital to notice that the figures related to sexual violence behave somewhat differently from the other POC indicators. That can be explained by the fact that sexual violence is an epidemic in the CAR (Pham et al., 2020, p. 373). It is also clear that there is a vast sub-notification of this POC indicator in the CAR. In this regard, only in 2014, 44.5% of the CAR population suffered some sexual or gender-based abuse (Gilder, 2021, p. 216), showing that the actual numbers of sexual violence by armed groups are much more significant than the officially reported cases. Sadly, even French Sangaris forces and MINUSCA personnel allegedly abused young Central Africans in exchange for water and food between 2013-2015 (Howard et al., 2020, pp. 107-108).

More recently, the POC indicators show a consistent decrease in violence against civilians in 2019 and 2020. In this context, Kabatanya (2020) highlights the Portuguese QRF operations, which helped to disorganize and deter the main ex-Séléka and Anti-Balaka groups, creating the necessary conditions for peaceful negotiations. Consequently, in May 2019, the 14

recognized armed groups, the CAR government, regional organizations, and observer states signed the Political Agreement for Peace and Conciliation (APPR) (Howard et al., 2020, p. 81). Therefore, it can be inferred from this analysis that the Portuguese QRF has effectively performed POC tasks associated with Tier 2 activities during the pre-emption and response phases, positively impacting the POC in the short term.

5.3 Establishment of a safe environment

Establishing a safe environment is a primary UN peacekeeping operation objective and comprises actions of the UN system, humanitarian actors, and the host government. It includes three basic elements: promoting legal protection, facilitating humanitarian assistance and advocacy, and supporting national institutions. Additionally, the establishment of a safe environment incorporates the processes of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration, as well as security sector reform (Manton, 2012, p. 72).

In this research, the indicators selected to evaluate the establishment of a safe environment in the CAR are the number of clashes between armed groups and the IDP population in the country. In this sense, while clashes between armed groups indicate the risk of collateral damage to civilians and/or overflow of violence, the IDP population reveals a sense of security that allows civilians to return to their homes.

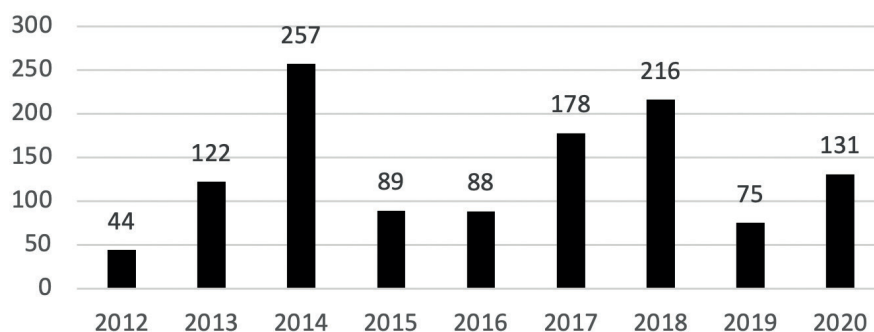


Figure 9 – Clashes between armed groups in the Central African Republic

Source: adapted from ACLED (2022).

From 2012 to 2014, there is a dramatic increase in clashes between armed groups of 484.09%. In 2015, there is a significant decrease of 65.37%. From 2016 to 2018, there is another growth in clashes between armed groups of 145.45%, followed by a new drop of 65.28% in 2019. In 2020, there is a further increase of 74.67% compared to 2019. The average number of clashes between armed groups in the CAR between 2012 and 2020 is 133.33.

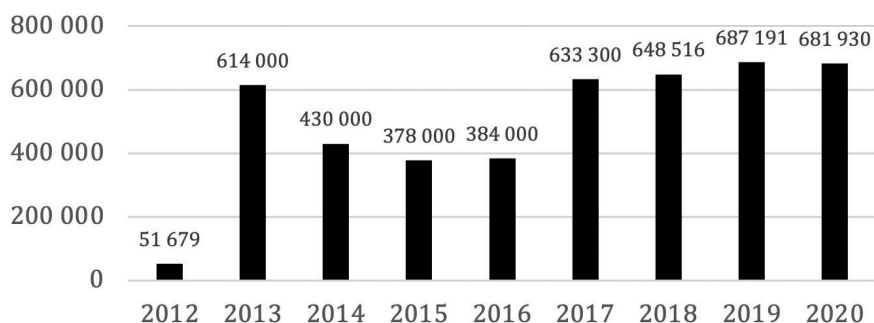


Figure 10 – IDP population in the Central African Republic

Source: adapted from UN OCHA (2022) & UNHCR (2022).

The number of IDPs grows an astonishing 1.088% between 2012 and 2013. From 2013 to 2015, there is a decrease of 38.44%. In 2016, the IDP population remains relatively stable. Between 2016 and 2017, there is another significant growth of 64.92%. From 2017 to 2020, there is a slight increase in the IDP population of 7.68%. From 2012 to 2020, the average number of IDPs in the CAR is 500,957.

5.4 Analysis of the establishment of a safe environment

The Portuguese QRF, which is the main object of this study, is not directly involved in this POC dimension. This is because the establishment of a safe environment belongs to Tier 3 of the POC Operational Concept, and most of its activities take place during the prevention and consolidation phases. As verified in the previous section of this paper, the employment of the Portuguese QRF focuses on POC tasks related to Special Tasks and Special Reconnaissance, which are more associated with Tier 2 activities and occur during the pre-emption and response phases. Nevertheless, this research analyzes the general influence of MINUSCA and the indirect impact of the Portuguese QRF over this POC dimension.

Moreover, as well as in the analysis of physical violence against civilians, this study examines if the variations in clashes between armed groups and the variations in the number of internally displaced persons are correlated or if they occur randomly. Thus, the following scatterplot helps determine the existing correlation between these two POC indicators linked to the establishment of a safe environment.

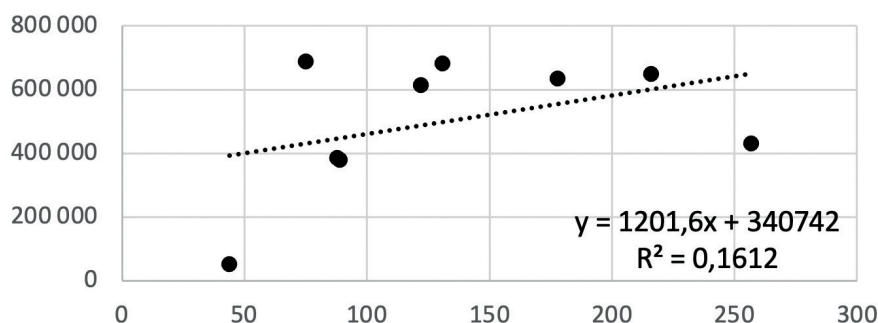


Figure 11 – Clashes between armed groups x IDP population scatterplot

Note: this graph shows the degree of relationship between violent deaths and sexual violence by armed groups. The R² (coefficient of determination) equals 0,1612 or 16.12%. The regression line of this correlation is obtained by the equation: $y = 1201.6x + 340742$.

According to Figure 11, the selected indicators vary accordingly only 16.12% of the time. Hence, the equivalent correlation coefficient for this test is 0.40, indicating a weak to moderate positive correlation. Furthermore, considering an alpha of 0.05, the p-value for this correlation is 0.2840. Also, as $0.2840 > 0.05$, this weak to moderate positive correlation is not statistically significant. Therefore, it is not possible to affirm that the changes in both POC indicators follow the same pattern.

In fact, establishing a safe environment is a highly complex goal within a UN mission. This is because several factors, such as food, health, poverty, economic opportunities, and crime, also impact the safety of an environment (Buzan & Hansen, 2009). Thus, it is a challenging task to isolate the relation between the employment of peacekeepers and this POC dimension or tier. Nevertheless, in the following paragraphs, this research draws some conclusions based on qualitative analyses of the selected POC indicators.

Concerning clashes between armed groups, the transformation of MISCA in MINUSCA and the implementation of Operation Sangaris helped to reduce the numbers related to this POC indicator in 2015 and 2016. In 2017, the withdrawal of international troops, including the French Sangaris, created instability that generated a power vacuum and, consequently, more clashes between ex-Séléka and Anti-Balaka groups. In 2019, after re-establishing a deterrent asset within the MINUSCA (the Portuguese QRF), it was possible to negotiate the APPR with all 14 recognized rebel groups. This political achievement resulted in fewer clashes in 2019 and 2020.

Nonetheless, the situation remains very complicated in the CAR, where more than two-thirds of the country continues to be controlled by the existing armed groups (Bellamy & Hunt, 2021, p. 157). According to Howard (2019, p. 131), only the Popular Front for the Rebirth of Central African Republic controls half of the CAR's territory, while other rebel groups control another 30%. The author explains that the peace process favored the formalization of these groups, which have used the process to obtain concessions from the government and strengthen their possession over their controlled territory (Howard et al., 2020, p. 73).

Regarding the IDP population, the implementation of the MINUSCA and Operation Sangaris have also achieved positive results from 2014 to 2016. As well as in clashes between armed groups, this POC indicator worsened significantly after the departure of the French Sangaris from the CAR. However, unlike the previous POC indicator, the re-establishment of a deterrent asset, materialized by the Portuguese QRF, has not impacted the number of IDPs in the country. In 2020, one-fourth of the Central African population remained displaced within the country as IDPs or outside the CAR as refugees (ICG, 2020, p. 3).

In general, MINUSCA made significant progress in building prefectures, courts, and prisons, restoring the rule of law, and training staff. Nonetheless, in terms of establishing a safe and protective environment, the mission has faced a considerable challenge in building local capacity through the SSR process (Howard et al., 2020, p. 22). In this sense, the main objective of the UN regarding the SSR process is to restore the authority of the FACA.

However, the armed forces in the CAR have been a source of insecurity for decades (Carayannis & Fowles, 2017, p. 220). For this reason, the FACA remains highly distrusted by most Central African citizens (Zimmerman, 2020, p. 9). Furthermore, the mission has failed to help implement several provisions of the APPR concerning the security sector reform, including creating mixed military units in which 40% of the personnel belongs to the FACA and the other 60% belongs to demobilized rebel groups. Therefore, this research concludes that MINUSCA, including the Portuguese QRF, has not been able to significantly impact the establishment of a safe environment in the CAR.

6. Conclusions

This research verified that the civil war generated by the Séléka coup and the Anti-Balaka groups' retaliation created an immense humanitarian crisis in the CAR. In 2014, as a response to this crisis, the UN transformed the regional MISCA under the AU into the MINUSCA, taking control of the mission and raising the number of peacekeepers in the CAR. A few months before that, France had deployed Operation Sangaris to help stabilize the country. Thus, between 2014 and 2016, while MINUSCA's battalions performed policing tasks under the UN Police command, the French Sangaris used military force and air power to respond to POC incidents. Additionally, the presence of American special forces and Ugandan infantry troops in the hunt for the LRA in southeast CAR has also contributed to reducing violence against civilians in this period.

However, in late 2016, Operation Sangaris withdrew from the CAR, followed by American and Ugandan troops at the beginning of 2017. Without a deterrent mechanism in the country, violence against civilians increased dramatically. Hence, after an agreement with the EU, the UN decided to create the Portuguese QRF to assist in-place UN forces, provide deterrence, and respond decisively to threats and attacks on the population and UN personnel/assets. Given the hostile operational environment and the high risk for the troops, Portugal decided to deploy the QRF, also known as the National Detached Force or FND, based on a Commando company.

Under the UN doctrine, special operations units such as the FND must be able to contribute to the protection of civilians by performing three principal missions in the scope

of a peacekeeping operation: Special Tasks, Special Reconnaissance, and Military Assistance. In this context, the research question for this study was: how has the Portuguese QRF contributed to the protection of civilians in the CAR?

In order to respond this question, the following hypothesis guided this study: the employment of the Portuguese QRF significantly increases MINUSCA's capability of protecting civilians in the Central African Republic. Hence, the employment of the Portuguese QRF was the independent variable of this research, directly affecting the dependent variable: the MINUSCA's capability of protecting civilians in the Central African Republic.

Methodologically, this research consisted of a mixed-methods case study of an embedded type with a qualitative predominance, in which the quantitative data and analysis helped to enhance and reinforce the qualitative data and analysis. For this reason, even in cases where the correlation tests were not statistically significant, the quantitative data was analyzed qualitatively, contributing to the results of this study.

Firstly, this study addressed the independent variable by comparing the expected tasks to be performed by a special operations unit under the UN doctrine to the actual employment of the Portuguese QRF. As a result, this paper concluded that the Portuguese commandos have conducted all POC tasks associated with Special Tasks and Special Reconnaissance. Nevertheless, the Portuguese QRF has not carried out Military Assistance. In this regard, the EUTM and Russian forces have replaced MINUSCA in this task by providing expertise, advice, and training to the FACA. Also, the Portuguese commandos have not been engaged in providing expertise, advice, and training to UN conventional troops, which could result in a better performance of the entire mission. Thus, the employment of the Portuguese QRF has been directed to contain and deter existing or imminent violence against civilians.

Having understood that the Portuguese QRF has been employed in compliance with the UN doctrine, although with limitations, this study analyzed the impact of the Portuguese commandos on the protection of civilians considering two POC tiers or dimensions: physical violence against civilians and establishment of a safe environment. After analyzing qualitatively and quantitatively three POC indicators associated with physical violence against civilians, it was possible to affirm that the Portuguese QRF has created a physical and psychological effect on the armed groups. In this way, the Portuguese commandos have effectively replaced Operation Sangaris as a powerful deterrent asset, contributing to the containment of the rebel groups and the reduction of physical violence against civilians. Additionally, these short-term actions have helped establish the conditions for the negotiation of the 2019 APPR.

On the other hand, the Portuguese QRF has had minimal impact on the establishment of a safe environment. This is because the Portuguese commandos have not conducted Military Assistance aiming at long-term results. Thus, the QRF has neither contributed to the security sector reform process nor enhanced UN conventional troops' performance. Nevertheless, by contributing to the containment of the armed groups and the consequent achievement of the APPR, the Portuguese QRF helped reduce clashes between armed groups.

In general, the establishment of a safe environment remains a challenge in the CAR. Apart from the MINUSCA, both EUTM and Russian forces have conducted Military Assistance to

the FACA to build local defense/security capability. Nonetheless, there are no improvements concerning the sense of security in the country, which can be attested by the persisting number of IDPs and the incapacity of the Central African state to retake about two-thirds of its territory still controlled by hostile armed groups.

This research contributes to the Military Sciences for two main reasons. The first concerns the detailed analysis produced on the impact of a special operations unit on the protection of civilians, providing tools for the validation of this UNSC strategy focused on robust peace operations. The second main reason is that this study examines the state of the art of the use of force for the protection of civilians in hostile environments. It may therefore be used as a source of information for updating doctrine within the Armed Forces.

Finally, this study does not exhaust the knowledge on the impact of special operations units on the protection of civilians in UN robust peacekeeping operations. In fact, this research only covers a period of approximately five years of Portuguese QRF deployment in the CAR. Moreover, the difficulties in obtaining more detailed data on the missions performed by the Portuguese QRF, mostly because of the sensitivity of these actions, the unavailability of consolidated quantitative data on POC indicators after 2020, the unfeasibility of carrying out a field study in the CAR and the impossibility of completely isolating the impact of the Portuguese QRF from the rest of MINUSCA limited the collection of data. Therefore, a follow-up of the performance of the Portuguese QRF in the CAR over a longer period of time, as well as further studies on the deployment of special operations units in other peacekeeping operations under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, are recommended to complement this research.

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