



## U.S. security aid enables torture in Cameroon

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A recent video showing the Cameroonian military executing two women and two children by gunshot to the head shocked many Americans, most of whom are certainly unaware that since 2002 the United States has trained nearly 6,400 soldiers, sold Cameroon \$6 million worth of American weapons, and provided its military with \$234 million in security aid.

Making matters worse is the fact that this sort of behavior is nothing new in Cameroon. In 2017, Amnesty International revealed that the Cameroonian military tortured prisoners in over 20 sites, and recorded 101 cases of incommunicado detention and torture between 2013 and 2017. Chillingly, the report also notes that many of these actions took place at the same military base used by U.S. personnel for drone surveillance and training missions. During the U.S. fortification of this site -- known as Salak -- Amnesty International found that suspects were subjected to water torture, beaten with electric cables and suspended with ropes, among other horrors.

American counterterrorism policy should never allow the ends to justify such means. Though unintentional, American counterterrorism policy in Cameroon has done just that. Even after learning of the crimes documented in the Amnesty report, the United States continued to provide training and funding for the Cameroonian military, enabling the ongoing torture and the execution of innocent people.

The rationale for American aid and assistance to Cameroon since 2001 has never been in question. Nigerian-based Boko Haram -- a group briefly affiliated with the Islamic State -- is indeed a violent group. It is responsible not only for the famous kidnapping of over 276 schoolgirls in 2014 but also for tens of thousands of deaths in Nigeria (and many in Cameroon, as people fled across the border from Nigeria to escape) since 2009. Beyond this, Cameroon is Central Africa's second-biggest economy after Nigeria and is a development hub with regard to paved roads and sea ports, both of which play a large role in the region's future. Though Boko Haram does not pose a direct threat to American national security (it has never attacked the

United States), it certainly remains a destabilizing force in Africa today. As such, making efforts to help local partners confront and manage Boko Haram is a reasonable policy.

Unfortunately, the very states like Nigeria and Cameroon that suffer from violent insurgencies and terrorism are also extremely unreliable partners. Cameroon ranks among the world's 25 most fragile states, rife with corruption and political instability. As noted, the government has a track record of human rights abuses and makes extensive use of the military and police to oppress political opponents. Putting money and weapons in the hands of such governments is a recipe for disaster.

Thus, even though American "advise and assist" efforts were designed to enable Cameroonian forces to better fight terrorist groups, the United States has effectively strengthened a military that now uses its newfound abilities against civilians, spawning further human rights abuses and raising the risk of state failure.

Nor is this just a problem in Cameroon. American intervention and assistance in Somalia, Ethiopia and Nigeria, just to name a few, risk similar unintended outcomes, or perhaps even worse. Academic research has shown that, over the past four decades, foreign military training increases the likelihood of a military-led *coup d'état* because of the way it strengthens military organizations relative to civilian ones within a state.

And despite all of the American money and aid, it also looks like there is a real chance that U.S. counterterrorism efforts could backfire in Africa. A recent report from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace found that the American military presence in Africa has not only created backlash against local governments but spawned increased resentment of the United States. U.S. Africa Command's own force posture statement recognizes that "abusive security forces" can make local populations "prime targets" for exploitation.

Given how small the threat of African-based terrorism is to the United States today, it makes little sense to take actions that may wind up increasing the threat in the future. Though there are no easy answers to the question of how to combat terrorism, especially in places like Cameroon, Washington needs to take steps to ensure that it does not enable the torture and oppression of Cameroonians in the name of American national security.

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