

Don't repeat mistakes against Boko Haram in Cameroon

Strong-arm tactics against civilians didn't work in Nigeria

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Boko Haram's spate of attacks in Cameroon and the government's heavy-handed response highlight the need for a regional governance strategy to respond to the crisis, not merely a military one.

In September, Amnesty International published a [report exposing](#) the war crimes perpetrated by Boko Haram in Cameroon, where the group is estimated to have killed 400 people. The report generated controversy for detailing not the group's brutal slaughter of Cameroonians but the improprieties committed by the Cameroonian government in the fight against Boko Haram.

The report suggests that Cameroon appears to be repeating the mistakes that Nigeria made in the early days of the insurgency. Abusing the citizenry and detaining suspects in deplorable conditions will only strengthen the insurgency's ability to recruit from an alienated population in both Nigeria and Cameroon.

In 2009 the Nigerian government [killed 700 people](#) around Maiduguri in an attempt to quell the insurgency. The indiscriminate nature of the violence, which killed scores of civilians, as well as the extrajudicial execution of Boko Haram's founder, Mohammed Yusuf, instilled a sense of frustration and alienation in the population. By 2010, Boko Haram had [regrouped under Abubakar Shekau](#) with improved technological capabilities, likely broader support and a new set of grievances that shifted the group's targets from local political and religious elites to representatives of the central government. Nigerians often view the Joint Task Force, the Nigerian military arm charged with fighting the insurgency, with suspicion because of the brutal tactics it has employed.

Under Shekau, Boko Haram has not only used the state's violence against citizens to mobilize support but also capitalized on Nigerian prison conditions as a propaganda tool. In 2010 the group orchestrated a prison break in Bauchi, freeing [several hundred prisoners](#). Boko Haram publicized its action in pamphlets and speeches, portraying itself as the protector of a persecuted community. In a similar vein in 2014, the group launched [a brazen attack](#) on the notorious Giwa military barracks. The conditions there, catalogued by [Amnesty International in 2015](#), are wretched, marked by overcrowding, torture and a lack of rule of law. The perceived persecution by the Nigerian government of communities in northeastern Nigeria, combined with the horrific conditions that detainees are subjected to, have strengthened the appeal of Boko Haram's narrative.

Unfortunately, Cameroon seems to be following Nigeria's missteps. The military force deployed to combat the insurgents in northern Cameroon, [the Rapid Intervention Battalion](#) (BIR), has a checkered past there. In February 2008, it was deployed to [suppress protests over the high cost of living](#) in Douala and Yaoundé. An estimated 100 citizens were killed in clashes with security forces, human rights advocates say. Just a few months later, President Paul Biya used the BIR to avert mass protests after constitutional changes that [granted the president immunity and the ability to remove presidential term limits](#).

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The BIR is unlikely to have improved its reputation among northern Cameroonians. "Since 2014, Cameroonian security forces have arrested and detained more than 1,000 people suspected of supporting Boko Haram," [Amnesty International's report](#) said; most of these arrests were made in "mass screening operations or cordon-and-search raids where security forces round up dozens, sometimes hundreds, of men and boys." The report details looting and rampant abuses throughout the process of mass detention. One of the men interviewed told Amnesty International, "[That day, I had no money, and](#)

[so they took my child.](#)” His statements corroborated reports that bribes were paid to security forces for the release of their sons.

Additionally, the report suggests that [130 men and boys](#) have gone missing while in Cameroonian custody. This sort of heavy-handed policing in the name of counterterrorism is only likely to bolster Boko Haram’s ability to recruit from an aggrieved population.

Amnesty International found Maroua prison similar to Nigerian prisons. Maroua, where the majority of detainees are held, was characterized by “[overcrowding, lack of sanitation and inadequate health care.](#)” Amnesty International asserts that these conditions, in which there was no running water and fewer than 20 toilets for more than 1,200 people, led to the deaths of at least 40 prisoners from March to May 2015.

Earlier in the year Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Niger came together to form the Multinational Joint Task Force to counter Boko Haram through enhanced military capacity. Just as necessary as a military response to the insurgency is the promotion of strong civil-government relations to prevent radicalization and participation in terrorist activity. Unfortunately, there appear to be no regional efforts to learn from the successes and failures of counterterrorism policy against Boko Haram.

Issa Tchiroma, Cameroon’s minister of communication, criticized the Amnesty International report, stating, “They will be wise if they avoid [getting into misconceptions of a legitimate state](#) fighting against the acts of violations and destruction committed by an organization whose soul and conscience are built on the ground of terrorism.” His unwillingness to acknowledge governmental mistakes suggests that Cameroon is in for a protracted conflict with the insurgency, worsened by a tone-deaf government.

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The views expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America’s editorial policy.

