

Institution: Goldsmiths, University of London		
Unit of Assessment: 32, Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory		
Title of case study: Raising public awareness of US proximity to torture and detention in Cameroon leads to the release of detainees and formal US Army internal inquiries		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2017		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Professor Eyal Weizman	Professor of Spatial & Visual Cultures; Principal Investigator	2005-
Christina Varvia	Researcher-in-charge	2015-2020
Sarah Nankivell	Project Manager	2007-
Robert Trafford	Researcher, Visual Cultures	2017-
Simone Rowat	Researcher, Visual Cultures	2017-2019
Nicholas Masterton	Researcher, Visual Cultures	2017-
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2017-18		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact <p>Commissioned by Amnesty International, Forensic Architecture (FA) a research agency based in Visual Cultures, Goldsmiths, investigated allegations of torture, detention and killings at two military facilities in Cameroon.</p> <p>In 2017, as a result of our research, an undisclosed number of detainees were released from one of the military facilities, military aid from the United States (US) to Cameroon was temporarily halted over human rights concerns, and an internal inquiry was launched by the US Army's Africa Command. The research also contributed to an ongoing debate in international news media concerning the behaviour of the country's military partners, and exposed new information about how the US military operates in the region.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>Forensic Architecture (FA) is a research agency that undertakes advanced spatial and media investigations into cases of human rights violations, with and on behalf of communities affected by political violence, human rights organisations, international prosecutors, environmental justice groups, and media. 'Forensic architecture' is also the name of an emergent academic field which refers to the production and presentation of architectural evidence within legal and political processes.</p> <p>According to Amnesty International, multiple sites across Cameroon's Far North region are being used as extrajudicial 'black site' prisons by the country's military in its ongoing conflict against the Boko Haram terrorist group. In 2017, FA was commissioned to investigate two such facilities. Our research confirmed the conditions of incarceration and torture described</p>		

by former detainees in testimony to Amnesty, and exposed the presence of US Special Forces at the site, leading to challenging questions for the US military [3.1] [3.5].

FA's research used witness testimony, hand-drawn maps, satellite images, and techniques of open-source investigation or 'OSINT' (open source intelligence), a discipline pioneered by FA and others which has transformed investigative reporting and human rights monitoring in recent years [3.4].



Image [1]: A map of Salak, a regional military headquarters where FA research showed that detainees were illegally held and tortured

In this case, open source satellite images were matched with on-the-ground images from within the sites, which were found via social media including Facebook. The interrogation of this found media using digital modelling and other techniques of architectural analysis is at the heart of FA's research approach, developed by its founder-director Professor Eyal Weizman [3.3]. The approach deploys architectural tools to construct precise digital models from images and videos, and subsequently uses those models to navigate between those media, constructing an 'image complex' from which additional evidentiary conclusions can be drawn. Theoretically, the approach is 'counter-forensic'; the tools of forensic investigation are turned back toward the actions of the state, using open sources to break through the 'cordon' which surrounds and obscures the state's actions [3.1] [3.2] [3.4]. In this case, the walls of a military facility, to which FA gained access through images from satellites and social media.

This architectural analysis was complemented by online research for documents and other contracts. Publicly available contracts contained references to the military facilities, implying the installation of a permanent US military presence in at least one, and open source human rights reports would later be used to counter claims by the US government that they had been unaware of the violence being carried out in proximity to their soldiers. This research is based in techniques popularised by the 'OSINT community', a flexible and ever-changing online culture which has in recent years led to major investigative revelations and subsequent impact in the fields of geopolitics and human rights [3.2] [3.4].

3. References to the research

- [3.1] Weizman et al, [Torture and Detention in Cameroon](#), Forensic Architecture, (2017) accessed 17 November 2020 [Website] Available online.
- [3.2] Eyal Weizman and Anselm Franke (eds), *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth* (Sternberg, 2014) [Book] Available on request.
- [3.3] Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability*, (Zone Books, 2017) [Book] Submitted to REF2.
- [3.4] Eyal Weizman, '[Open Verification](#)', *E-Flux* (2019) accessed 17 November 2020 [Article] Available online/on request.
- [3.5] Weizman et al, *Torture and detention in Cameroon: The dark side of the us-backed war against Boko Haram. Salak & Fotokol, Cameroon 2017*, in ARQ (Santiago), n. 101, 2019, accessed 17 November 2020 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4067/S0717-69962019000100028> [Article] Available online/on request.

4. Details of the impact

Impact 1: Cameroonian military release detainees from extrajudicial detention

According to a researcher working with Amnesty International in 2017;

'FA's work on the Salak case led to aspects of military aid from the US to Cameroon being suspended, while a number of detainees held extrajudicially in the Salak facility were released into the Cameroonian judicial system.' Following their release from extrajudicial detention, these individuals were no longer subject to torture or illegal incarceration [5.1].

Impact 2: US Africa Command launch internal inquiry

In July 2017, the month after FA's research was published, US Africa Command launched an inquiry into the allegations, including whether US personnel had knowledge of torture and extrajudicial killings as described by our investigation, and whether Africa Command and US personnel could have been aware of such activity. As such, FA's research tangibly impacted the processes of internal US government practices and monitoring [5.2].

Impact 3: US suspend military aid to Cameroon

According to the notes of a meeting between Amnesty International and the investigating officer within US Africa Command, support directed to the Cameroonian military under 'Title 10' of the United States Code was paused for an indeterminate period as a result of FA's investigation. This has had a demonstrable impact on the operational capacity of the Cameroonian military, an institution whose disregard for human rights and civil liberties during and since the period of our investigation is widely demonstrated [5.2].

Impact 4: Media discussion raises public awareness in US

Following FA's research, a former State Department analyst asked in the editorial pages of the *Washington Post* whether the US is 'turning a blind eye' to human rights abuses by its allies' security forces. Our investigation was specifically cited as 'impressive'. Regarding the presence of US personnel at the Salak military base, the article concluded: 'it is hard to believe that our eagle-eyed special operators could have been oblivious'.

Our research thereby impacted ongoing discussion internationally, tangibly impacting the conditions of debate around a topic of significant public interest, and better equipping international publics to act democratically upon the issues raised [5.4].

Impact 5: NGOs and journalism adopt 'OSINT' methodology

'FA's work on the case demonstrated the potential for open source research methods... for human rights cases' [5.1].

This case was a seminal example of our 'open source investigation' research practice, contributing to the development of 'OSINT' ('open source intelligence') as a new frontier in investigative reporting. In a recent interview with the *Global Investigative Journalism Network*, Malachy Browne, who leads the *New York Times* visual investigations unit, cited FA directly as 'pioneers' of the approach [5.7].

Organisations such as Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, and media organisations such as the *New York Times* and the BBC, have in recent years adopted techniques of open source investigation which were pioneered by agencies such as ourselves, Bellingcat, Airwars, and others. Those partners and adopting agencies testify to the impact of FA's practice on the field [5.8] [5.9].

The success of open source investigative techniques has created new avenues for accountability, and FA's place at the forefront of that development led to the appointment of our Director and Deputy Director as members of the Technology Advisory Board at the International Criminal Court (ICC). Recent years have seen the first examples of charges brought by the ICC based entirely on open source evidence, charging a Libyan militia commander of killing prisoners of war [5.5].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[5.1] Statement by former researcher at Amnesty International (2017)

[5.2] Statement by former regional manager at Amnesty International (2017)

[5.3] News report by Ryan Browne, '[US military launches inquiry into torture allegations at Cameroon base](#)', CNN, August 2017 [Retrieved 17 November 2020]

[5.4] News report by Matthew Page, '[In the war on Boko Haram, is the U.S. turning a blind eye to Cameroon's abuses?](#)', *The Washington Post*, July 2017 [Retrieved 17 November 2020]

[5.5] Article by Nikita Mehandru, Alexa Koenig, '[Open Source Evidence and the International Criminal Court](#)', *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, April 2019 [Retrieved 17 November 2020]

[5.6] News item by Olivier Holmey, '[How Forensic Architecture Supports Journalists with Complex Investigative Techniques](#)', *Global Investigative Journalism Network*, June 2020 [Retrieved 17 November 2020]

[5.7] Statement by Malachy Browne, *The New York Times* Senior Storyteller, Visual Investigations

[5.8] Ned Beuman, '[How to Conduct an Open-Source Investigation, According to the Founder of Bellingcat](#)', *The New Yorker*, August 2018 [Retrieved 17 November 2020]

[5.9] Statement by Eliot Higgins, Executive Director of Bellingcat