

Report Part Title: BOKO HARAM'S DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE IN SUICIDE BOMBING

Report Title: Exploding Stereotypes:

Report Subtitle: The Unexpected Operational and Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram's Suicide Bombers

Report Author(s): Jason Warner and Hilary Matfess

Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point (2017)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep05615.7>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to this content.

JSTOR

on a mosque on June 27, 2016. A pair of suicide bombers attempted to gain entrance to the mosque but were denied by the vigilante. Both bombers detonated outside of the mosque, only managing to injure the vigilante.¹⁰⁵

PART 3: BOKO HARAM'S DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE IN SUICIDE BOMBING

While the previous section highlighted the operational dimensions—the *where, when, why, and how*—of Boko Haram's suicide bombing efforts, this section turns its attention to *who* is deployed as a bomber.

Before delving into the demographic makeup of Boko Haram's suicide bombers, however, it is necessary to paint a picture about the demographic contours of other terrorist groups' suicide bombers. Beginning in the 1990s, studies suggested that as a demographic, suicide bombers were rightly characterized as “uneducated, unemployed, socially isolated single men in their late teens and early 20s.”¹⁰⁶ And leveraging a cross-group study of suicide bombers from Hezbollah, Palestine, and Muslim adolescents during Gaza's first Intifada, Hassan suggested that, as of 2008, the average suicide bomber was approximately 25 years of age, male, single, and childless.¹⁰⁷ Yet contemporarily, others have argued that, to the contrary, suicide bombers do not fit a uniform or monolithic profile.¹⁰⁸

Our data shows that, indeed, the profile of the modal Boko Haram suicide bomber is profoundly unique, especially in comparison to studies that have been done on other terrorist groups. In the case of Boko Haram, the average suicide bomber is a female who deploys as part of a coordinated attack with other females and targets a civilian space. Indeed, in overtly colorful language, Boko Haram has ‘exploded stereotypes’ about the demographic profiles of suicide bombers, especially via its use of women and children, both of which will be discussed subsequently.

3.1: Ironic Gender Equality: The Use of Female Suicide Bombers

While this section elucidates the role of women in Boko Haram's suicide campaign, we first investigate the broader question of why groups—though few and far between—have elected to use women suicide bombers at all. In her seminal study on the unique characteristics of female suicide bombers, O'Rourke has concluded that the adoption of this tactic was the result of “an interface between the terrorist organizations' strategic motives and the individual motivations of female attackers.”¹⁰⁹ Boko Haram's female suicide bombers, then, are a reflection of both recruitment by the insurgency leadership as well as a female social base willing to tolerate (and perpetrate) these attacks. On the ‘demand’ side of this equation, Boko Haram seems to have especially benefitted from female suicide bombers in light of the increased security presence as a result of the state of emergency.¹¹⁰ What may have prompted more women to volunteer for (bearing in mind that many are conscripted into) these attacks, on the ‘supply’ side, remains unclear.¹¹¹

A sociological rationale underlies the employment of women as suicide bombers. They are often

105 “Would-be suicide bombers target mosque in Nigeria,” AFP, June 28, 2016.

106 Pape, *Dying to Win*, summarizing Merari (1990) and Post (1990), p. 2.

107 Riaz Hassan.

108 Nichole Argo, “Human bombs: Rethinking religion and terror,” MIT Center for International Studies Audit of the Conventional Wisdom (2006): pp. 6-7.

109 Lindsey A. O'Rourke, “What's special about female suicide terrorism?” *Security Studies* 18:4 (2009): pp. 681-718.

110 A similar pattern can be seen in Palestine, where female suicide bombers emerged in 2002 when increased Israeli security made it difficult for young men to pass through checkpoints.

111 Speckhard and Ahkmedova.

viewed as being inherently innocent or non-threatening, thus arouse less suspicion than men. Particularly efficacious are young girls (whose role will be discussed later) and pregnant women, with the former rarely considered capable of presenting a security threat and the latter often assumed by societies around the world to be “beyond suspicion or reproach.”¹¹² Furthermore, females are especially effective as it would be socially unacceptable for a man to conduct a ‘body search’ of a woman. Given the paucity of women in the Nigerian security sector, this inability for searches creates a significant and dangerous security gap.

From a rational perspective, deploying women suicide bombers is a logical and economically sound tactic. According to Speckhard, not only are women more likely to avoid detection, it is the case that because women rarely serve in senior leadership roles within insurgencies, “from the group’s point of view, they are more expendable for suicide bombers.”¹¹³ An anonymous defected insurgent concurred, noting that women “are cheap and they are angry for the most part ... using women allows you to save your men.”¹¹⁴ Women also serve as a similarly cheap labor force. Interviews conducted with undetonated female suicide bombers reveal that Boko Haram offers money to the women that volunteer to be suicide bombers. A report by *Vanguard* found that girls were paid as little as 200 naira (about 64 cents) to buy themselves food before being used as bombers.¹¹⁵ It remains unclear if these girls’ families were paid for their participation as suicide bombers or what happens to their payment after detonation if it is unused. The extreme economic hardship that many women in the region face as a result of the humanitarian crisis—acutely felt among women without husbands—could incentivize many to accept such a clearly imbalanced proposition.

Boko Haram has also recognized the aesthetic benefits conferred by deploying women as suicide bombers. Bombs are easy to conceal under the billowy folds of women’s conservative clothing and the ability of women’s clothing to conceal explosive belts has been leveraged by dressing up men in women’s clothing, a phenomenon that will be detailed subsequently. Furthermore, female bombers have used handbags and even infant children carried on their backs to obscure the visibility of IEDs.

Boko Haram has several means by which to recruit its members. In some cases, women are an automatic addition to the group; marriage-based membership appears to be the most common way for women to enter into the insurgency.¹¹⁶ However, women are also more susceptible to both structural and physical violence by male insurgents. A number of female suicide bombers are not given a choice about their deployment on suicide missions; but in many instances, a woman’s choice is not between suicide bombing and life, but rather between suicide bombing and violence and harassment. Boko Haram has also coerced women into being bombers, both through promises of salvation and being reunited with their families.¹¹⁷ Some report that they are threatened with being killed or having their family members killed if they refuse to be a suicide bomber.¹¹⁸

An Unprecedented Total Number of Female Suicide Bombers

Of the 434 total number of Boko Haram’s suicide bombers, 244 of the bombers are identified as female—a rate of at least 56% of bombers in total and 72.2% of bombers with an identified gender. This

112 Bloom, “Female Suicide Bombers: A Global Trend.”

113 Speckhard, “The Emergence of Female Suicide Terrorists,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31:11 (2008): pp. 995-1,023.

114 Hilary Matfess interview, anonymous defected insurgent, Abuja, Nigeria, 2017.

115 “Boko Haram Gave Me N200 To Detonate Explosive, Says Suicide Bomber,” *Vanguard News*, February 8, 2017.

116 This can happen through two channels. The first is when women who are already married join with their husbands. This can be a coerced decision or one made with mutual enthusiasm. The second way in which women join Boko Haram through marriage is by becoming an insurgent’s wife. Again, this can be a voluntary or coerced partnership.

117 Dionne Searcy, “Boko Haram Turns Female Captives Into Terrorists,” *New York Times*, April 8, 2016.

118 “Kano Blasts: Twin Bombs In Nigeria Market ‘Kill 11,’” *BBC News*, November 18, 2015.

representation is markedly above the average gender distribution of suicide bombings by insurgencies, particularly among other Islamic groups. Taken holistically, this suggests that Boko Haram is an insurgency with significant female membership (both coerced and voluntary), an operational context that favors the use of women, and a leadership team willing to subvert norms related to women in combat.

Of all outcomes of this study, perhaps the most important is Boko Haram's unprecedented use of female suicide bombers.¹¹⁹ Having deployed 244 women suicide bombers between April 2011 and June 2017, Boko Haram has now used more female suicide bombers than any other insurgency in history, surpassing the record established by the Tamil Tigers, who used 44 female suicide bombers over 10 years.¹²⁰

Boko Haram did not begin to use women as suicide bombers until 2014, three years after its first suicide bombing. What underlies this relative delay in the employment of female suicide bombers? Aside from the obvious departure from the gender roles prescribed by conservative Islamic theology, one answer could simply be that the use of women suicide bombers had not materialized as offering any perceived strategic utility over alternatives. The turning point at which it was recognized that women suicide bombers might offer distinct advantages over males likely came with the April 2014 kidnappings of the so-called "Chibok Girls," and the evident salience that gender (and youth) played in eliciting shock and awe in both the local and international community. The Chibok abductions gave Boko Haram, perhaps for the first time, a truly global prominence. Thus, 2014 stands out as a pivotal year for Boko Haram and its use of suicide bombers. Not only was the year the first time a female suicide bomber was deployed, but in that year, women constituted more than half of bombers (among bombers with identified genders). Over time, the threat from female suicide bombers has become so pervasive that, according to residents of Maiduguri, the CJTF has at times instituted an "unofficial curfew" for women, preventing them from moving freely within the city between 7pm and 7am.¹²¹ However, this does not prevent women from engaging in attacks, especially since women bombings have generally been at crowded places, often during busy times that are not particularly affected by the curfew.¹²² Similarly, some bus drivers have become reluctant to pick up female passengers at all.

In addition to the sheer number of women used as suicide bombers, Boko Haram has also used a greater number of women as a percentage of its total suicide bombers than any other groups in history. Overall, 56.2% of bombers were identified as female, though the proportion of bombers that are female appears to be on the rise. Between January 1 and June 30 of 2017, a shocking 64.5% of the bombers with a gender marker were female. Compared to the global average for women suicide bombers—which Bloom¹²³ has estimated to be around 15% of most groups' workforce for groups that employed them between 1985 and 2006—speaks to the degree of innovation toward gender that Boko Haram has brought to the practice of suicide bombing. Furthermore, it appears that Boko Haram's reliance on female suicide bombers may be a result of shifting attitudes within the salafi-jihadi global community,

119 It appears that female bombers are more likely than male bombers to have an age estimate reported; 104 of the female bombers in our dataset were given an age or age estimate by the media, as opposed to just 30 of the men. Though the gross numbers of youngest girl-bombers reported are much higher than boy-bombers (23 and five, respectively), the distribution of child, teen, and adult bombers by sex are remarkably similar. Consider that among male identified bombers with an age estimate, 16.7% are children, 36.7% are teenagers, and 46.7% are adults; among female bombers with an age estimate, 22.1% are children, 40.4% are teenagers, and 37.5% are adults. From this, we can conclude that despite some of the breathless reporting about Boko Haram deploying girls as suicide bombers, it is clear that boys are also being abused in such a fashion. Advocacy should thus frame the issue as a threat to children, gender nonspecific, to be as accurate and effective as possible.

120 Mia Bloom and Hilary Matfess, "Women as Symbols and Swords in Boko Haram's Terror," *Prism: a Journal of the Center for Complex Operations* 6:1 (2016): p. 104.

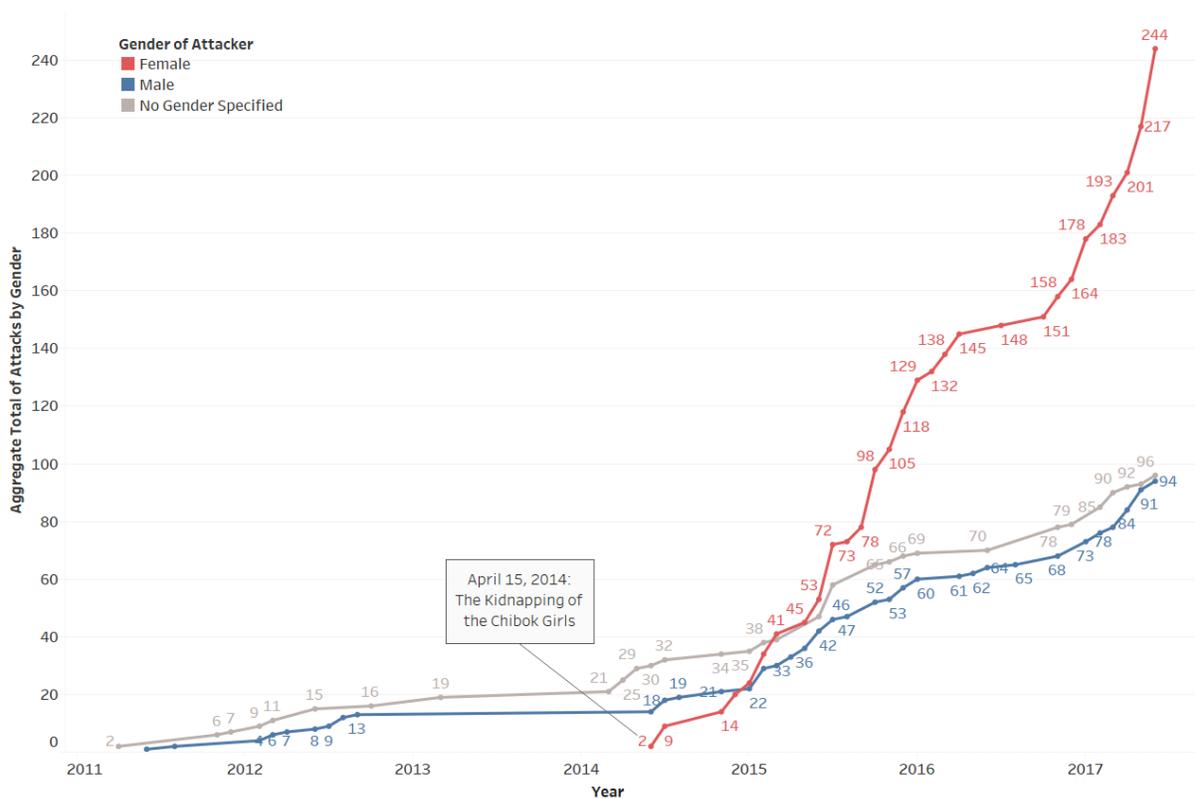
121 Hilary Matfess fieldwork interviews, Maiduguri, Nigeria, 2017.

122 This is especially challenging if some of the bombers do not know that they are carrying explosives and are detonated remotely. It is worth debating whether these women can rightly be considered 'suicide' bombers, given their lack of agency, or if a new term should be adopted to describe such attacks.

123 Bloom, "Female Suicide Bombers: A Global Trend."

as well as a driver of that attitudinal change. A number of Muslim clergy have given statements or issued *fatwas* that allude to support or at least ambivalence toward the use of female suicide bombers. In 2001, the High Islamic Council in Saudi Arabia encouraged Palestinian women to engage in suicide bombing in a *fatwa*, while other religious authorities have argued that women can participate in the operational side of jihad (including suicide bombings) under especially dire conditions.¹²⁴ In recent years, the rise of the Islamic State and al-Zarqawi’s “intense and unusual tactics” have led to a proliferation of female suicide bombers.¹²⁵

Figure 12: Boko Haram Suicide Bomber Attacks by Gender (April 2011-June 2017)



To be sure, while we make the point that Boko Haram has used more women suicide bombers than any other terrorist group in history, it is far from the first group to use women as bombers at all. The first female suicide bomber, Sana’a Mehaydali, blew herself up in 1985 near an Israeli convoy in Lebanon. Since then, the practice of using women has come to pass in insurgencies including the Palestinian Liberation Front, the Tamil Tigers, and among Chechen rebels.¹²⁶ Rarely, the Islamic State has employed female suicide bombers. According to Bloom, by 2003, of the 17 groups that use suicide bombing as a tactic, women have been used as bombers by approximately half of these organizations.¹²⁷

124 Debra D. Zedalis, *Female Suicide Bombers* (The Minerva Group, 2004).

125 Hillary Peladeau, “‘Support for sisters please’: Comparing the Online Roles of al-Qaeda Women and their Islamic State Counterparts,” University of Western Ontario, 2016.

126 Bloom, “Female Suicide Bombers: A Global Trend.” Chechens rebels valorized women’s role in suicide bombings to the extent that it operated a women’s only suicide bombing group called the “Black Widows,” while women bombers in the Tamil Tigers ascended to the elite ranks of the groups.

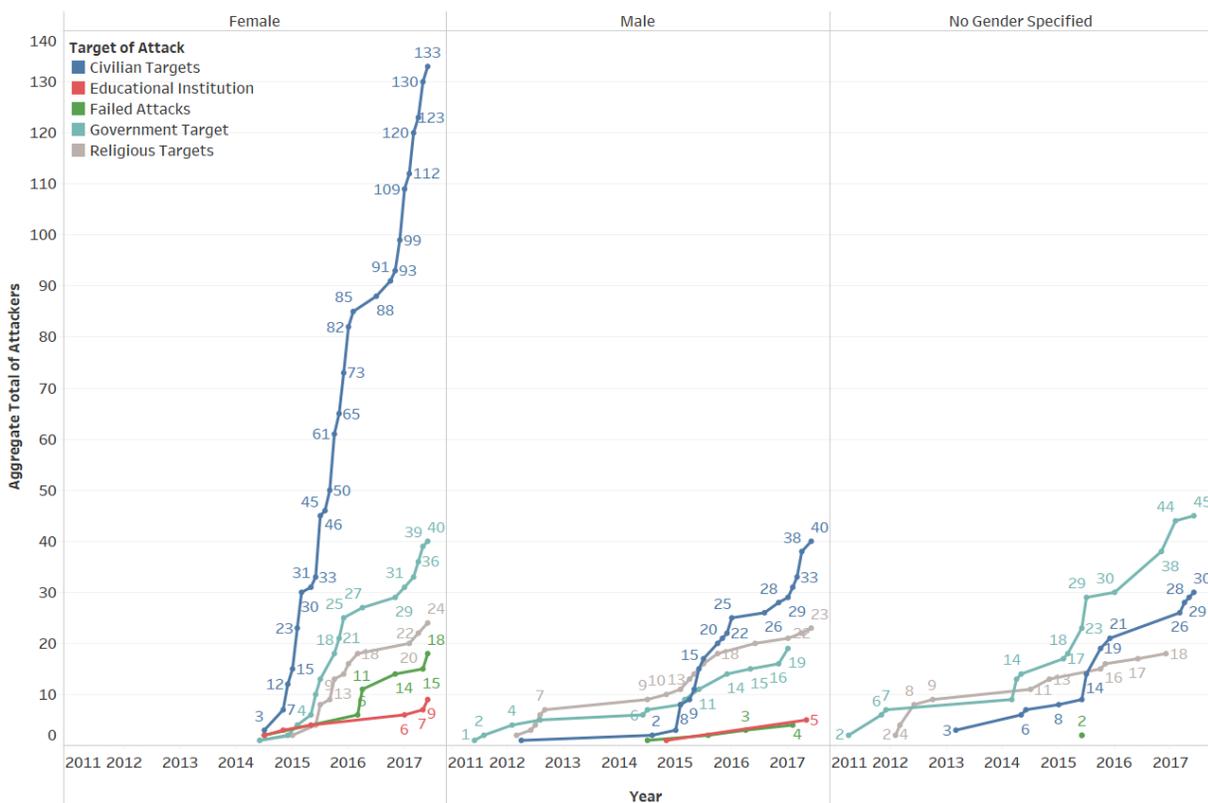
127 Ibid.

Differences in Targeting by Gender: Women’s Focus on Civilian Targets, Men’s Focus Elsewhere

There is a clear pattern of gender-differentiated targeting among Boko Haram’s suicide bombings. A few points bear bringing to light regarding the different ways that male and female Boko Haram suicide bombers choose their targets. First, while one-third of attacks on Christian institutions were by bombers who were identified as male, our data does show that only one female-identified suicide bomber was reported to have attacked such an institution.

Second, of the 77 targets for male bombers, only four were on IDP camps (5.2%), unlike women’s efforts (over 10% of female bombers’ 110 targets). Third, and most importantly, our data shows that women are most frequently sent to civilian targets. Over 25% of targets struck by women were markets; an additional 27.8% were sent to bus stations, educational institutions, and other secular non-governmental targets. By comparison, men targeted markets only 11.7% of the time and were disproportionately more likely to target Islamic institutions. This pattern of female targeting of civilian institutions may reflect the lower levels of screening that women face (relative to their young male counterparts) in these sorts of areas. Similarly, the role of women in Boko Haram’s understanding of Islam may reflect women’s relative non-use in the arena of Islamic targets. The trends toward civilian targeting and Boko Haram’s use of female suicide bombers are strongly linked, given that both increased following the international community’s outcry to the kidnapping of the Chibok Girls.

Figure 13: Boko Haram Suicide Attacks by Gender per Target (April 2011-June 2017)



Having addressed the gendered patterns of suicide bomber targeting, the issue of efficacy of detonated bombers remains. In short, when Boko Haram suicide bombers successfully detonate, there appears to be very a marked difference in their effectiveness along gendered lines. Men were involved in 73 attacks and produced 630 casualties; women were involved in 126 attacks, which produced 1,018 casualties (noting that some men and women were joined together and many bombers did not have listed genders). At a glance, it appears that attacks with men and women are similarly effective (kill-

ing, on average, 8.6 and 8.1 individuals per attack, respectively). However, women are often paired, or sent in large groups, and thus are much more ineffective overall. The average fatalities per bomber is approximately 4.2 for female bombers (note that this differs from our overall average lethality estimates, which include estimates for bombers whose gender is unidentified) and 6.7 per male bomber.

Fausse Femmes: The Use of Men Dressed as Women While Serving as Suicide Bombers

Boko Haram has also been shown to employ a tactic wherein its male suicide bombers are at times dressed as women. At its core, this tactic is used to make men appear less suspicious to vigilante groups and soldiers at checkpoints, effectively increasing their chances of carrying out successful and fatal detonations. The use of men dressed as women suggests that the insurgency is aware of the effectiveness of female bombers and is using them as an example for would-be male bombers to emulate. The use of male bombers dressed as women also suggests a level of planning and coordination related to the attacks that is not necessarily apparent upon first analysis of the group's profile. Indeed, this sort of planning may suggest that the lower average lethality per bomber may not be a result of a lack of operational capacity, but rather the result of a strategy.

For instance, in late January 2016, men in Gombe, Nigeria, donned female attire and behaved as "mad women" in order to carry out a suicide bombing. They successfully detonated their explosives and were the cause of five fatalities.¹²⁸ A male suicide bomber in Chad utilized a similar tactic for his deadly mission. Over the weekend of July 11, 2015, a man dressed in a full veil hid explosives underneath his burqa. He detonated at the checkpoint outside of N'Djamena's marketplace, killing 15 and injuring 80.¹²⁹ Such attacks demonstrate the insurgency's recognition of the operational benefits that female bombers enjoy, suggesting that the use of female suicide bombers is a strategic decision rather than a matter of coincidence or the availability of female bombers.

3.2: Boko Haram's Use of Child and Teenage Bombers

Before investigating the data on Boko Haram's use of child and teen suicide bombers, what logic lies behind the choice to employ them at all?

At the heart of why Boko Haram uses child and teen suicide bombers is that their employment in such activities has proven to inspire profound shock and awe. Precisely because children are normatively and legally—via the Geneva Accords—assumed to be outside of the bounds of war-fighting, their use might be thought of as a signaling device to civil groups to show both the seriousness of purpose and potential for brutality of Boko Haram. Indeed, the involvement of children in terrorist activities, though not common prior to the 21st century, was predicted as early as 1996 as a coming phenomenon, given that the "deliberate victimization of children" in terror operations could serve to "broaden the acceptable limits in order to maintain the overall climate of fear."¹³⁰ Boko Haram's inordinate use of child and teen suicide bombers might rightly be thought of as the ultimate social transgression, putting into play some of the most vulnerable members of society who often have limited cognizance of their actions.

Most bluntly, Boko Haram finds child and teen suicide bombers beneficial because children and teens have little agency over their own actions. Owing to their physically small size and immature cognitive development, children and teens are inherently easier to coerce into suicide bombings than adult

128 "Boko Haram changes tactics for terror attacks in Nigeria," Zee News, January 31, 2016.

129 "Suicide bomber kills 15 in market as Boko Haram takes revenge on Chad," *Times*, July 13, 2015; Madjiasra Nako and Moumine Ngarmbassa, "Suicide Bomber In Burqa Kills 15 People In Chad Capital," Reuters, July 11, 2015.

130 Max Taylor and John Horgan, "Future Developments of Political Terrorism in Europe," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 11 (1999): pp. 83-93.

counterparts, who have relative—though oftentimes still limited—agency over their actions. Moreover, investigations into the use of Boko Haram's child suicide bombers show that children are often disinclined to reveal their ordeals, even to their own communities, for fear of both stigmatization and violent physical reprisals.¹³¹ Moreover, reports from UNICEF in April 2017 suggested that some children have been drugged prior to serving as suicide bombers.¹³² Beyond their susceptibility to physical manipulation, children and teens are also vulnerable to psychological manipulation. For instance, when a part of insurgent groups, children sometimes come to learn the names of—and subsequently idolize—the group's suicide bombers as aspirational figures.¹³³

Another benefit of using children as suicide bombers is that they are difficult to detect and thus effective at penetrating otherwise secure areas. Because of their smaller size, inferior place in society, presumed innocence, and generally non-threatening statuses, children are viewed as ideal decoys for more nefarious actions. In especially blunt terms, some have referred to children's roles as undetectable bomb-carriers as "little carts," for "their ability to sneak hidden weapons through military checkpoints without arousing suspicion."¹³⁴ As Bloom has assessed, "the use of the least likely suspect [children] is most likely a tactic of a terrorist group under scrutiny."¹³⁵

Children are also ideal for the use as suicide bombers as they serve as a generally costless source of labor. In the same vein that child soldiers have been used extensively throughout other African insurgencies—especially in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Sudan in the 1990s and in the Lord's Resistance Army in the Great Lakes region in the 21st century—Boko Haram has been similarly inclined to use parentless children in its operations, both as soldiers (as has been done by other insurgencies, in Africa and elsewhere) and as suicide bombers (which is innovative to Boko Haram).

A final reason that children and teens make for good suicide bombers is, simply, how easy it is to add them to the fold. Boko Haram is notorious for its kidnappings. Though full verification remains difficult, it appears to be the case that the majority of children that ultimately become child suicide bombers for Boko Haram are abducted; this is the case for both boys and girls.¹³⁶ Extant research has shown that children and teens have joined terrorist organizations because their friends have joined¹³⁷ (and sometime leaves because their friends leave)¹³⁸ or because they have been orphaned. An anonymous former insurgent turned blogger and government intermediary stated simply that the group has "children who have been orphaned, who are angry, who become bombers." In an opposite but equally tragic circumstance, certain accounts report that parents will sometimes offer up their children to be used as suicide bombers as a means of demonstrating their loyalty to the sect.¹³⁹ It is also conceivable that the children of Boko Haram members are being deployed as suicide bombers—a true testament to the group's efforts to harness the resources of its full membership.

131 "Lake Chad conflict: alarming surge in number of children used in Boko Haram bomb attacks this year – UNICEF," UNICEF Nigeria, April 12, 2017.

132 Samuel Osborne, "Boko Haram Increasingly Using Drugged Children As Suicide Bombers, Warns Unicef," *Independent*, April 12, 2017.

133 Ali and Post.

134 Peter Warren Singer, *Children at War* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2006).

135 Bloom, "Female Suicide Bombers: A Global Trend."

136 It is possible that the number of child abductees is in the thousands, to say nothing of the children brought into the insurgency through their families or incentivized to join by material incentives. See, for example, "Our Job Is To Shoot, Slaughter And Kill"; Boko Haram's Reign Of Terror," Amnesty International USA, April 2015.

137 John Horgan, Mia Bloom, Chelsea Daymon, Wojciech Kaczowski, and Hicham Tiflati, "A New Age of Terror? Older Fighters in the Caliphate," *CTC Sentinel* 10:5 (2017).

138 Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, *The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2016).

139 Eli Berman, *Radical, religious, and violent: The new economics of terrorism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

An Equal Opportunity Deployer? Limited Data on Boko Haram Bombers' Ages

Like its use of female suicide bombers, Boko Haram's use of child and teen suicide bombers is an innovative—though profoundly tragic—characteristic of Boko Haram's version of jihad. There is a significant range in the ages of Boko Haram's suicide bombers. Of the 134 bombers with an estimated age, 53 were identified as 'adults,' 53 were identified as 'teenagers,' and 28 were identified as 'children.' It is worth observing here that 300 bombers did not have an age estimated or reported. The number of bombers identified as non-adults amounts to 60.4% of all bombers with an identified age, a significant proportion that requires caveating our dataset and using other datasets to nuance our analysis. In total, our dataset shows that 81 non-adults (children and teenagers) were involved in 46 of Boko Haram's 238 attacks, or 19.3% of all attacks and 66.7% of all attacks in which an attacker had a listed age.

Relying exclusively on the data that we were able to collect, our estimates on the uses of child and teen suicide bombers are not robust, due to the lack of reporting on ages or age ranges of bombers. Retaining a similar logic that was discussed regarding suicide bombers' gender, we assume that in instances where media did not report age, the bomber was in fact an adult, as child or teen bombers would be more anomalous and thus newsworthy. We also realize, however, that in the event of successful detonations, the remains of the perpetrator may also not provide sufficient evidence of age, particularly in the case of children. Thus, while we interrogate the use of child and teen suicide bombers below, we supplement our analyses with data derived from other studies on the uses of child suicide bombers, including an April 2017 UNICEF report.

The Youngest Bomber

In our dataset, the youngest recorded age of a child suicide bomber was seven years old. Three girls of seven years of age were used in two attacks: one paired attack and one solo attack. On the weekend of December 9, 2016, two seven-year-old girls detonated explosives, killing one and injuring 17 at a market in Maiduguri, Nigeria.¹⁴⁰ In an earlier case, a seven-year-old girl killed five and injured 19 in a market in Potiskum, Nigeria, on February 22, 2015.¹⁴¹

A Focus on Girls

From our limited data, it appears that girls are much more likely than boys to be deployed as suicide bombers, at a ratio of approximately four to one. Of the 81 identified child or teenage attackers where the gender was identified, 23 were girls and an additional 42 were teenage girls, as compared to five male children and 11 teenaged boys. These trends broadly track with more detailed analysis presented in the April 2017 UNICEF report, which suggests that one in every five Boko Haram suicide bombers is a child, with three-quarters of child bombers being female.¹⁴² Indeed, the outstripped use of female children highlights a dual marriage of innovations: the use of both women (discussed in the previous section) and children (highlighted in this section) to form an unprecedented new tactic for lethality.

To be sure, numerous ethical issues surround Boko Haram's use of children as suicide bombers. Most acutely, observers have expressed worry about the involvement of children in conflict. Beyond the physical and at times existential agency that children lose, children in the group's orbit also forgo schooling, healthcare, social interaction, and the possibility of a "normal" childhood. According to the U.N.'s 2007 Paris Principles on the Use of Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, the use of chil-

140 Tom Powell, "Nigeria: Two girls, both aged 7, used by Boko Haram in suicide bomb attack," *Evening Standard*, December 11, 2016.

141 "Seven-Yr Old Suicide Bomber Blow Self Up, Kills Five in Potiskum," *Vanguard News*, February 22, 2015.

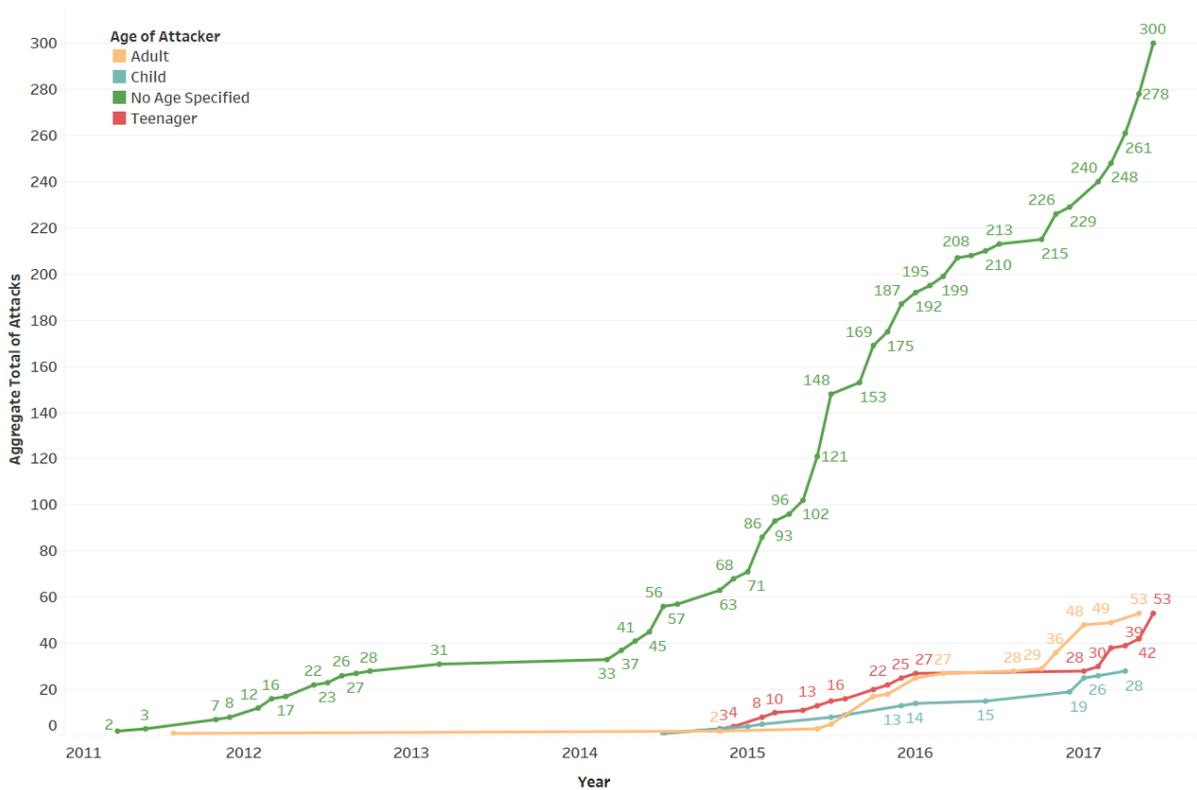
142 "Beyond Chibok: Over 1.3 Million Children Uprooted by Boko Haram Violence," UNICEF, April 2016.

dren under the age of 15 as soldiers is classified as a war crime by the International Criminal Court.¹⁴³ To the extent that Boko Haram has become noted for its use of child suicide bombers, Amnesty International has called for the group to be investigated for war crimes for the practice.¹⁴⁴

An Overall Increase in the Use of Child Bombers

According to our dataset and additional inputs from UNICEF, the first instance of Boko Haram’s use of a child suicide bomber occurred in July 2014, experienced a peak in 2015, a dip in 2016, and a resurgence in 2017.

Figure 14: Boko Haram Suicide Bomber Attacks by Age (April 2011-June 2017)



How are we to explain the genesis and prolongation of Boko Haram’s outstripped use of child suicide bombers over time? We suggest that Boko Haram began employing children in its suicide bombing operations because the group learned the efficacy of using children in approximately 2014 as a result of two events. First, in April of that year, Boko Haram gained global prominence after its kidnapping of the Chibok Girls, highlighting to the group the potency of children as symbols in its terror operations. Second, we argue that although Chibok highlighted the power of the use of children in its operations, the rise of the Islamic State in the Levant, which has prominently featured children in its propaganda¹⁴⁵ even as other jihadi groups, like the al-Qa`ida-affiliated Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, have critiqued it for doing so,¹⁴⁶ encouraged Boko Haram to continue to involve children, as an emulation of the

143 “Child Recruitment,” United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, 2015.

144 “Our Job is to Shoot, Slaughter, and Kill.”

145 Horgan, Taylor, Bloom, and Winter; Mia Bloom, John Horgan, and Charlie Winter, “Depictions of children and youth in the Islamic State’s martyrdom propaganda, 2015–2016,” *CTC Sentinel* 9:2 (2016).

146 *Ibid.*

group. Indeed, the 2015 *bay`a* to the Islamic State likely compelled Boko Haram to more profoundly incorporate children into its operations, in the vein of its (ostensible) parent organization—whose use of children as suicide bombers nearly doubled between January 2015 and January 2016 and whose use of operations involving children tripled in that same time period.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, as Bloom, Horgan, and Winter argue from their study of the Islamic State’s eulogization of children, “we can assert with confidence that the use of children and youth has been normalized under the Islamic State’s rule.”¹⁴⁸

Since then, Boko Haram has continued to leverage children in its operations, even more intensely, precisely because of their efficacy. At the time of this writing, the use of children seemed to be increasing as a proportion of the group’s suicide bombers. More than 40% of the child bombers deployed by Boko Haram (35) were bombers that have been deployed in 2017.

Targeting Differences of Child Suicide Bombers

When it comes to targeting practices, our data reveals that Boko Haram’s child and teen suicide bombers also tend to be deployed to civilian targets. In fact, of the 45 targets attempted by children or teenagers, almost half were markets, IDP camps, or bus stations. What lessons are we to draw from the deployment of non-adult bombers to these targets? First, it should be recognized that similar to the deployment of female suicide bombers, the use of child bombers is both the result of and an enabling factor behind the group’s shift toward targeting civilians. This strategy has marked the group’s outlook since 2014, at the beginning of when it moved away from attacking religious targets to focusing more heavily on markets and bus stops, and consistent with how the Islamic State employs children, which is to deploy to attack civilian targets where children blend in more easily.¹⁴⁹ Among other insights—not revealed by our data—other sources show that Boko Haram’s child suicide bombers disproportionately targeted Cameroon, both in relative, and—highly surprisingly—absolute terms, between January 2014 and February 2016, during which time Cameroon experienced 21 child bombers, Nigeria 17, Chad two, and Niger none.¹⁵⁰

The Surprising Efficacy of Child and Teen Suicide Bombers

Child and teen suicide bombers are also somewhat surprisingly effective as concerns the deadliness of their attacks. Bombings in which a child or teen is involved have a higher fatality-per-attack than the group’s average, at 9.4 casualties per attack. When deployed singularly, they are most effective, at 11.3 casualties per bomber. However, their rates of failure are also high. Nevertheless, young bombers, when dispatched together, may be especially lethal, likely partially because of their ability to encourage each other to detonate.

On December 9, 2016, two paired female suicide bombers, described as “schoolgirls,” detonated in a market in Madagali, killing 56 and wounding more.¹⁵¹ The next deadliest attacks involving children had 20 fatalities each. The first attack was perpetrated by a 12-year-old girl in Maroua, Cameroon, on July 25, 2016. She set off an explosive device in a bar, injuring 79 in addition to the 20 killed.¹⁵² The second attack serves as perhaps the most interesting and troubling case. A 10-year-old girl detonated in a crowded market in Damaturu, Nigeria, on July 26, 2015, with the explosion killing 20. However, there are doubts to whether the girl knew that she was going to explode or whether the explosion was

147 Ibid.

148 Ibid.

149 Bloom, Horgan, and Winter.

150 “Beyond Chibok: Over 1.3 Million Children Uprooted by Boko Haram Violence.”

151 “World Digest: Dec. 9, 2016,” *Washington Post*, December 9, 2016.

152 “In Brief,” *China Daily*, July 27, 2015, p. 12.

triggered by a remote control. Eyewitnesses, when recounting the attack, remarked that young girl was “blown in two” and that “it wasn’t clear if she knew what she was doing.” This case most acutely illustrates why Boko Haram views children as ideal suicide bombers and the vulnerability of these children face before they become bombers.¹⁵³

PART 4: ANALYSIS

Over time, the operational and demographic profile of Boko Haram’s suicide bombers have shifted, creating the strategic profile we see today—one which depends on the surprising combination of paired attacks, young and female perpetrators, and targeting civilian spaces. Thus far, though, as we have illustrated, while Boko Haram has been somewhat able to leverage its unusual demographic arsenal of suicide bombers to inflict casualties, there is significant room for the group to grow even more lethal. If Boko Haram is able to do so, the result could be catastrophic—for Nigeria, for the Lake Chad region, and for the international community.

We argue that Boko Haram currently has the demographic means by which to enhance the lethality of its suicide-bombing efforts and to grow into the operational proficiency that would make the group much deadlier than it is now. In order to best combat Boko Haram’s tactical development in this arena, it is important to understand its operational and demographic evolution in the past years. Any effort to combat the status quo in Boko Haram’s recent suicide-bombing practices and avoid further intensification should carefully examine how the group has learned from its mistakes and adopted the innovations it uses today. Proactive counterterrorism and counterinsurgency policies require identifying the historical evolution of groups’ operational portfolios and using the emergent profile to assess present and future capacity. Thus, we seek to understand how Boko Haram began in its use of suicide bombing and where it is today.

4.1: The Four Phases of Boko Haram’s Suicide Bombing Efforts

With this in mind, we conclude this report in suggesting that Boko Haram’s use of suicide bombers has occurred in four broad phases, characterized by shifts in types of bombers, targets, lethality, and success rates.¹⁵⁴ We detail the evolution of these periods below, which is evidenced in Figure 15.

153 “20 Killed in Maiduguri Poultry Market Suicide Bombing,” *Daily Independent* (Lagos), January 11, 2015.

154 We are clear to caveat the fact that our presented chronology should not be taken as absolute. There are, inevitably, exceptions to each category. Our goal is to provide a general heuristic for understanding trends in Boko Haram’s evolution, not rigidly categorize its actions.