

# Confronting the Unthinkable: Suicide Bombers in Nigeria

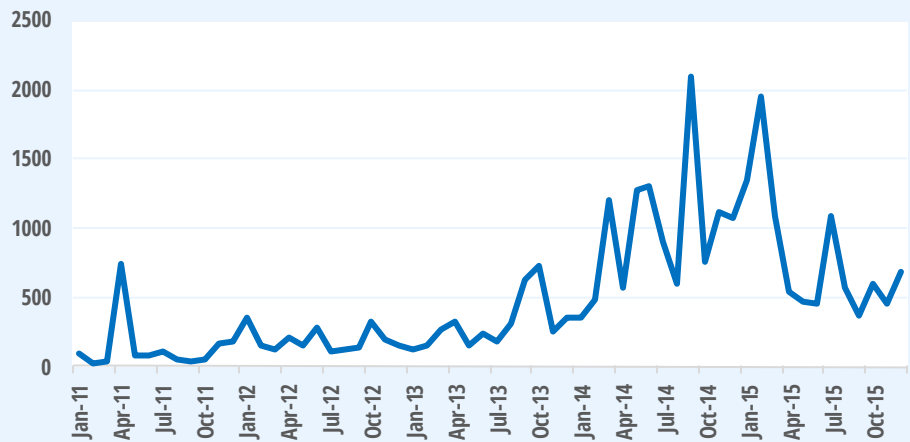
The Complex Dimensions Behind Women and Children Suicide Bombers in Northern Nigeria

Patricia Taft and Kendall Lawrence

In the early morning hours of February 9, 2016, in a sprawling camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Maiduguri, the capital of Nigeria's Borno State, three young girls thought to be looking for shelter, were welcomed inside. What the guards who admitted them didn't know, however, was that each was wearing an improvised explosive device strapped to her body. Minutes later, two of those girls were dead and with them an estimated 58 other victims, including many families seeking shelter from a raging insurgency that had driven them from their homes. An additional 80 people were badly wounded. The third girl reportedly recognized family members in the camp and refused to detonate her bomb, saving herself and countless others. Reports surfacing in the Nigerian press that day noted that the tragedy could have been much worse; it certainly has been before.

Over the past two years, attacks like these have come to characterize the deadly insurgency that has gripped Nigeria's north-east and north-central states. The crisis has

Fatalities in the Northeast plus Kano and Kaduna (North Central)



captured international attention in no small part due to such brutal tactics employed by Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (JAS), known globally as Boko Haram. The group, which changed its name in March 2015 to Wilāyat Gharb Ifrīqīyyah, or "Islamic State-West Africa Province," has been responsible for an estimated 15,000 deaths in Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad as of January 2016, according to the Council on

Foreign Relations' Nigeria Security Tracker. Increasingly, these deaths are civilians, with Boko Haram displaying a shift in tactics away from attacking military or hard security assets, and instead focusing on soft targets where civilians gather. This shift in tactics may in part be credited to the success of the Nigerian military in taking back territory seized by the group and improved intelligence in anticipating and

## About this Report

This report is based on research conducted by the Fund for Peace over the past two years as well as a series of interviews conducted over a weeklong period in Maiduguri, Borno state, and Abuja, FCT, in November and December, 2015. It is also based on analyzed data generated by the NSRP VAWG Observatory Platform, the Partners for Peace (P4P) Map (including data from Nigeria Watch and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project-ACLED). The Council on Foreign Relations' Nigeria Security Tracker (NST), was also used in the research and writing of this report. All views expressed are solely those of FFP and are not reflective of its funders or partners.

**Charlotte Bellm** contributed to this report.

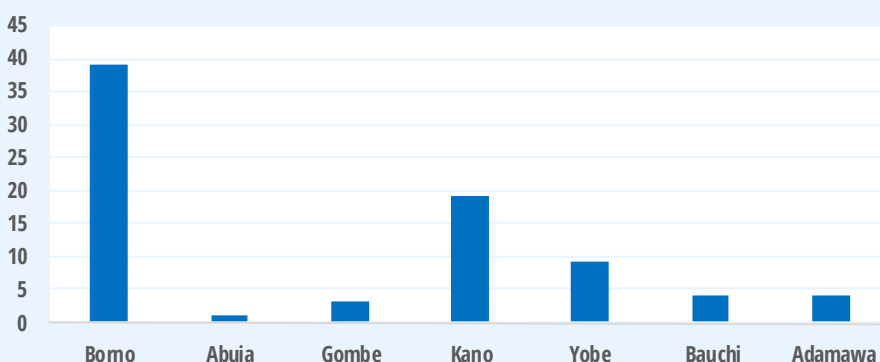
repelling attacks, but it also may be reflective of something else entirely.

According to data from the Partners for Peace (P4P) Map, and analysis by The Fund for Peace (FFP), following the April 2015 general elections which brought former military general Muhammadu Buhari to power, there was a marked drop in fatalities associated with the insurgency in the north-east. Although that number began to rise again with several suicide attacks in July, the decreased number of fatalities and the shift to relying increasingly on civilians to attack soft targets might be reflective of a turning point in the insurgency itself. Specifically, mobilizing more widespread support against the All Progressives Congress Party's (APC) winning candidate and fellow northerner may have become more difficult, particularly as Boko Haram relies heavily on mobilization based on a narrative of victimhood and rightful retaliation for the perceived historic exploitation and denigration of the North by southern Christians. While this theory has yet to be confirmed, the data firmly points to a sudden shift in both tactics and targets, which may well be reflective of not only the decreased capacity of the group to strike at government targets, but also its need to recruit from a civilian population. The civilians who are recruited to carry out violent Boko Haram missions, such as suicide bombings, are often the most vulnerable of the population, or those whose past or present may lead them to believe they have little hope for rehabilitation or acceptance into society again.

Although the Boko Haram insurgency has been ongoing now for nearly seven years, the trend that has been on the rise since mid-2014, shortly after the abduction of nearly 300 school children in Chibok, is the use of women and children as suicide bombers. According to Elizabeth Pearson, writing in the *International Business Times* in an October 16, 2014 article, the first attack by a female was carried out on the military barracks in Gombe in July 2014. Following that attack, a wave of female-

## Number of Female Suicide Bombers Per State

July 2014 — February 2016



Note: Number of female suicide bombers as reported via the Peace Map – not to be confused with number of incidents reported.

perpetrated suicide bombings followed, including four in the north central state of Kano, as well as the northeastern state at the heart of the insurgency, Borno. According to the Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme's (NSRP) Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Observatory Platform, which uses ground-sourced data to record and track incidents of violence against women and girls in eight Nigerian states, the death toll from those attacks was at least ten confirmed deaths with more than two dozen reported injured. In all incidents in Kano, the women were reported to be under 18 years of age, with at least one reported as a child under the age of 10. The numbers continued to rise and, by the end of 2014, according to the Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism, 41.2% of all Boko Haram-related incidents were reported to be carried out by female suicide bombers, many by children under the age of 18, with a total of 26 attacks recorded. Finally, according to UN estimates in a report released in mid-2015, since June of 2014, nearly 100 women and girls have been deployed for attacks in Nigeria that were previously carried out only by men.

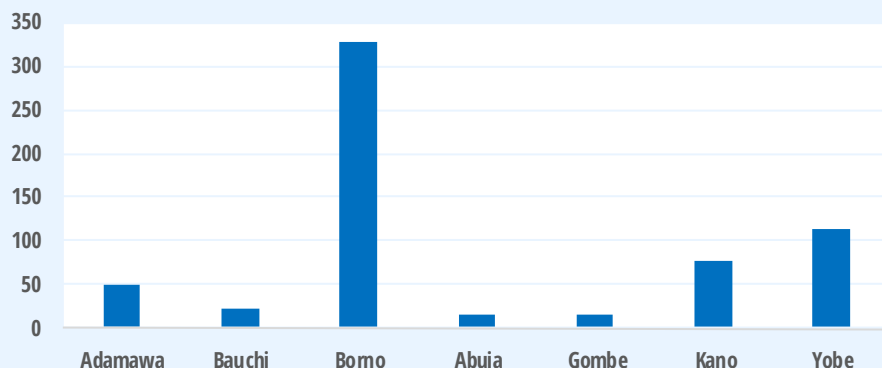
While the use of women and children as weapons of war in northern Nigeria and in neighboring countries is undoubtedly horrific, there is often the tendency to paint the phenomenon with a broad brush that identifies the bombers as victims without

agency, or the right of choice, in their fate. To the extent that this assumption has implications for response, it should be acknowledged that the question of agency is inevitably much more complex and uncomfortable. Certainly, no ten-year-old child can be said to be of a mental and emotional maturity to make such a fatal choice. However, the assumption that the women and children who have carried out these attacks are all abductees is false. Understandably, it is difficult to consider that a young woman would make such a choice or a parent would surrender a child knowing that child would be used to carry out such a deed. However, what research and data from FFP and its partners has shown over the past two years is that the truth is much more complicated than what is typically reported. It certainly deserves deeper analysis if strategies to combat both the recruitment of volunteers as well as the forced use of women and children as suicide bombers are to be effective.

To date, reporting on young women and child suicide bombers often entails a very black-and-white narrative about victimhood and may influence the methods employed to mitigate or prevent its occurrence. This has implications at both a strategic and tactical level as it often translates into a narrative that sees suicide bombers as either combatants or victims, both of which influence military and humanitarian

## Fatalities of Female Suicide Bombers per State

July 2014 — December 2015



planning and response. Given this, a deeper look into the broader conflict environment in which these attacks occur, and where the ideology of Boko Haram has gained a foothold, is necessary to effectively cope with both the societal and individual dynamics that lead to dozens of women and children killing themselves and scores of others. Moreover, although the Nigerian government has recently taken admirable strides in setting up psycho-social service networks for women freed from Boko Haram captivity and creating programs to help reintegrate survivors back into their communities, more needs to be done. To start, in understanding what might compel a young woman to volunteer for such a deadly mission and, moreover, what might compel parents to surrender young children to Boko Haram.

### A Crisis of Violence Against Women and Girls

One of the hallmarks of the Boko Haram insurgency, and that which has arguably generated the greatest international media attention, is the group's targeted abductions of women and girls. By far the most notorious incident to date was the April 2014 kidnapping of nearly 300 school girls in the town of Chibok, in Borno state. While the scale and brutality of this attack was staggering, it was by no means the first

or last time that the group would use mass abduction as a weapon of war and terror. Reports from women who have escaped as well as those who have been rescued tell of rape, forced marriages, and children born from these circumstances. Indeed, the group has stated that the education of women and girls is explicitly counter to what their worldview purportedly embraces, although, as explained more deeply below, it is part of a much broader ideology.

A car ride around the Borno state capital of Maiduguri last December was revealing in the sheer number of sandbags piled up outside of secondary and tertiary schools for girls. In fact, the driver of the car in which we were riding repeatedly called our attention not only to the number of institutions of learning — both general and vocational — in Maiduguri, but the number of schools for girls. (It should be noted, however, that many schools are now closed or in use as IDP camps). He recounted that in the past, many families from the region, as well as further afield, sent their daughters to be educated in Borno as it was known as a center for higher learning in the country, particularly for girls. When we noted the sandbags and armored military personnel vehicles outside of the schools that were still operating, he confirmed that attacks on girls schools are a frequent occurrence. Initially, the schools had been

assaulted by the armed militants themselves and, over the past year or so, by female suicide bombers as well. Currently, many parents who have the means to send their children simply do not anymore, both for fear of them being attacked while at school as well as being targeted later in attacks meant to warn other families to keep their girls at home.

In addition to the lack of access to education, the abductions, rapes, and children born of forced unions, the effects of the insurgency on women have spread widely across society and are often directly linked to overall insecurity. For example, the controversial use of civilian vigilante units to protect villages and neighborhoods and repel Boko Haram attacks has caused an infrequently discussed but nonetheless growing crisis involving female exploitation. Specifically, male members of these groups (also known as the Civilian Joint Task Force, or CJTF), have been heralded widely as heroes in their communities, particularly following earlier confrontations between Boko Haram and the Nigerian military where units were outmanned and outgunned and often retreated, leaving citizens to fend for themselves. The CJTF, which occasionally operated alongside military forces but frequently also formed completely separate units, were successful in pushing Boko Haram out of many civilian centers.

However, these vigilante groups have also been accused of using their "status" to harass and sexually assault women, particularly at checkpoints at night. Women interviewed in Maiduguri noted that the incidents of men demanding sexual favors from women caught trying to get through checkpoints after curfew has increased markedly in the past year. In some cases, women were assaulted on the spot, while in others, they were reportedly dragged away and raped before being freed. Many were subsequently encouraged by their families and communities not to report these events, lest it leave the community unprotected or targeted for revenge attacks.

Another corollary effect of the insurgency that has directly impacted women has been the massive IDP crisis, with villages and towns targeted by Boko Haram, and retaken later by the Nigerian military, becoming too dangerous for civilian survival. IDPs who are able to make it to camps in other cities and towns often face harassment and exploitation within the camps while others, who choose to stay with relatives or friends, become members of a growing population of the “uncounted.” These are civilians, many women and children, who are not officially registered or recognized as IDPs and thus not able to receive assistance — either material or psycho-social.

According to those interviewed about the IDP camps, another related practice that has arisen is that of young women who have either escaped from Boko Haram captivity (or have otherwise been made vulnerable by becoming IDPs) being given as second or third wives in exchange for a meager dowry or bride price. Although arranged marriage is common in many parts of northern Nigeria, this particular phenomenon was described as more of a practice of vulnerable women and girls, some as young as ten or eleven years old, sometimes being bargained off to men or families with little to no knowledge of the conditions they will be facing. Unlike traditional arranged marriages between families that are usually well known to each other and the community, these women and girls are sometimes seen as burdens on their host families or within the IDP camps. There is also the prevailing belief that the women and girls who have either been abducted or raped by Boko Haram fighters are now “tainted” or “damaged,” and this often compels families to seek to marry them off as soon as possible, even if the potential husband and family is either unknown or unsuitable. It is important, however, to note that women and girls also do choose this option themselves, rather than continue to live in the camps or with relatives or friends who feel that they are a burden on already struggling households.

Finally, in data from the NSRP Observatory Platform as well as interviews with Nigerian military personnel and former CJTF members, the repeated deployments and the rising incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder (although few, if any, report having been officially diagnosed or treated) has led to increased incidents of sexual violence at home. Marital rape, which has been reported to be on the rise since the start of the insurgency, is a rarely talked about source of domestic abuse that women are reluctant to report, in part due to a widespread belief that it “does not exist” within marriage. Women who are taken in by families and relatives after they are uprooted from their homes can also be targets of domestic violence, perpetrated by both men and women. Some of these girls, as young as nine, have reported being beaten and burned for minor infractions and some have been thrown out of homes with little to no recourse but to go to camps, which frequently offer even less security.

### Coercion or Choice?

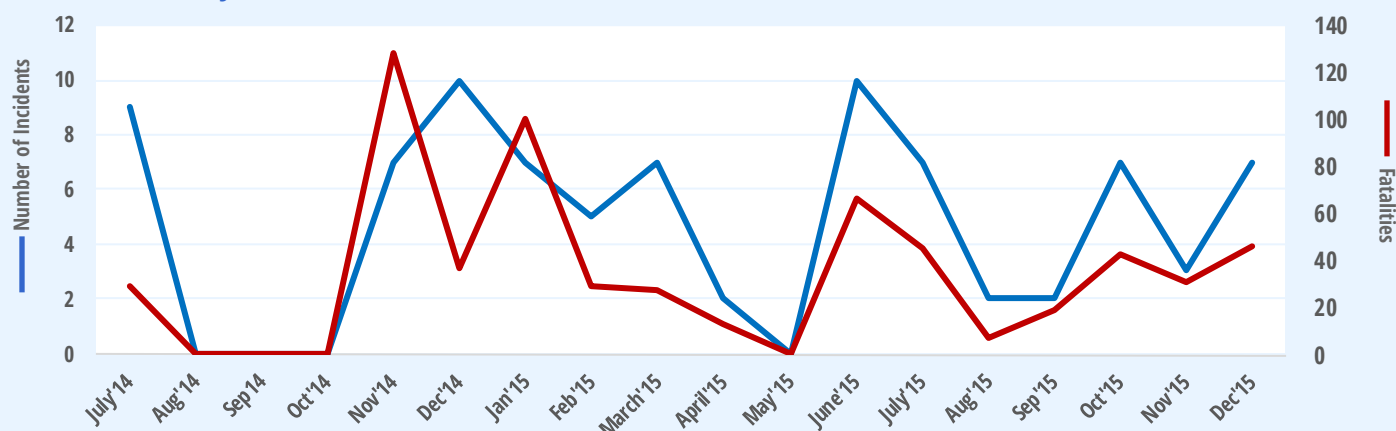
As with many complex humanitarian crises such as the one faced in northern Nigeria, the motivations and means for civilians to either reject or support (tacitly or otherwise) the insurgency is as multifaceted as the conflict environment itself. When it comes to the growing utilization of women and children as suicide bombers, the analysis becomes even more complex. Suicide bombers are a relatively new tactic in Nigeria, where even deploying males to carry out attacks was unheard of prior to the Boko Haram insurgency. While this article will not go deeply into the myriad social, environmental and political drivers that have fueled the rise of the Islamist insurgency in the north, nor will it offer an exhaustive examination of what motivates or dissuades individuals to sacrifice their lives in such a brutal manner, the role of agency and choice in the process as it applies to the context of northern Nigeria will be explored.

In interviews conducted during a FFP visit to Maiduguri, the tendency to view the

recruitment and use of women and children in the insurgency through the lens of victimhood alone was strongly discouraged. Nevertheless, in the case of children used as suicide bombers, it was pointed out that while some may have been abductees, or forcibly taken from their families, in other cases it was a choice on the part of the family to allow their children to be used in this manner. For some families, the Boko Haram ideology resonates deeply and the path of violent jihad, including the sacrifice of lives to further the goal of establishing a separate caliphate or in retaliation for past injustices by the government, is seen as a legitimate cause. It must also be acknowledged, however, that Borno and other regions of the North are by no means homogenous, and that even among and between various ethnic groups identifying as “northerners,” there is a degree of blame shifting as to where Boko Haram finds its greatest support base, which could lead to finger pointing when it comes to speculating from which group these bombers are coming.

In one of the higher profile cases reported by the BBC, occurring in Kano in late December 2014, a 14-year old girl recounted how she was taken by her parents to militants hiding out in a forest by her home to be deployed as a bomber. She later escaped the scene of the attack, where another girl detonated her explosives, without deploying her device. While this case gained international headlines because the girl alleged that her parents were devout Boko Haram followers and that led them to sacrifice her, in other cases it is far less simple. FFP was told, in some instances, it becomes an “impossible choice.” Families living in the areas where Boko Haram exerts influence, either physically or ideologically, are often confronted with the choice of sacrificing one child in order to allow their other children to live. In some instances, as other interviewees asserted, families are so deeply impoverished that children are exchanged for money or other goods needed for survival. This is often the case when a family has more mouths than it can

## Fatalities caused by Female Suicide Bombers and Number of Attacks



afford to feed, and especially when some of those mouths are female.

In most cases, it was emphasized that the children who are deployed as suicide bombers are not told about their mission or that their death is imminent. Many are simply sent to crowded areas with “packages” to be delivered to a specific person or location. Sometimes they are deployed in groups of two or more, a tactic one counselor working with children in the camps said may be a form of peer pressure to try to ensure that if one child began to question her mission, the others would exert influence on her to continue. In other cases, although occurring with less frequency over the past year, older boys were tasked with escorting the young female bombers to their location and leaving them with instructions to detonate their device after a certain time period had elapsed, allowing for the escort to flee the scene. Other reports have similarly noted older relatives or other individuals serving as escorts to ensure that the bombers did not become suspicious or attempt to remove the device.

In an interview with a Nigerian Army captain in Maiduguri, it was noted that the types of devices used are frequently some sort of improvised explosive device (IED), often unexploded ordinances recovered after Nigerian military attacks, although homemade bombs are also used. It was noted that in earlier attacks, the devices

were rigged to be remotely detonated after the child had reached the determined location. Others noted that recently, however, fewer devices are deployed via remote detonation and the majority of incidents reported in the past several months were of the bombers exploding the devices themselves. Whether this signals a change in tactics from coercion and forced missions to some other tactic being utilized to convince children and young women to blow themselves up is not yet known, although several individuals spoke of children being heavily drugged before being sent out. While interviews with survivors who were stopped prior to detonating their explosives are rare, counselors with whom FFP spoke, who have worked with rescued women and children or had knowledge of specific cases, spoke of brainwashing carried out either by relatives or members of Boko Haram who sometimes threaten their families if the children do not cooperate.

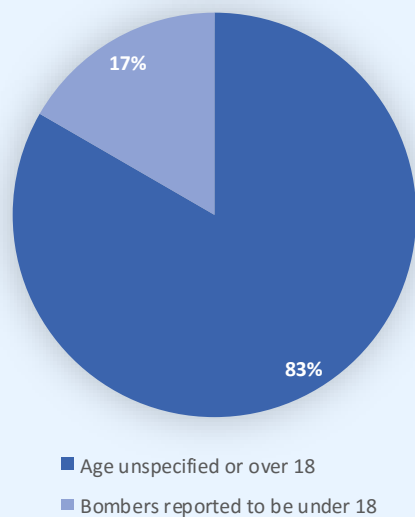
What motivates women, especially teenage girls, to carry out these missions (assuming they are not Boko Haram abductees with no choice) is undoubtedly complex. Some reports in the Nigerian and international media have speculated that Boko Haram has established camps where girls are routinely raped and forced into marriage in order to form a new “cadre” of female devotees willing to carry out suicide attacks, either themselves or through children that will be born later. While several reports and

interviews appeared to confirm that some women and girls captured or surrendered to the Nigerian military and police forces prior to carrying out a suicide mission have been abductees, others are assumed to be coerced in some other manner. Still others, as was noted by several individuals who were interviewed, may well be volunteers who, like some of their parents, find resonance with the Boko Haram message of sacrifice and retaliation. Moreover, there are others, as was related in a story told by one woman who has worked closely with returned girls, who have either been raped or impregnated and are thus thought to have been damaged or tainted, and have little to no chance at an education or marriage. These girls are thought to be the most difficult recruits to dissuade of them all, as they are exceptionally vulnerable to the specific form of brainwashing thought to be employed by Boko Haram. These women and girls can be adrift in a society where strict social and moral codes make their rehabilitation particularly difficult, especially given the conflict environment and the scarcity of resources available to treat so many who have been so deeply traumatized.

## Changing Tactics, Targets and Ideology

The changing tactics and targets of Boko Haram is thought to be reflective of both internal and external dynamics and

### Age Distribution of Female Suicide Bombers



pressures on the group. In general, Boko Haram has increasingly been focusing its suicide attacks over the past six to ten months on soft targets, such as markets or places of worship, where crowds of civilians gather. Unlike earlier in the insurgency, far fewer direct attacks have taken place on government installations such as military barracks, weapons and equipment depots, and military forces themselves. As noted earlier, this has been credited in part to an increased number of Nigerian military and intelligence assets now focused on and available in the region, including intelligence and surveillance assistance from Western countries, and overall greater regional cooperation with neighboring military and police forces.

The change in tactics and targets may also be the result of the decreasing efficacy of Boko Haram propaganda in the face of a northern, APC-appointed, political leader now running the country. This has potentially resulted in a decrease in the recruitment pool of male militants willing to die for the cause and a new reliance on civilians, particularly those with compromised agency, who can easily be threatened or manipulated by Boko Haram. In addition, while there are fewer instances of Boko Haram militants directly perpetrating attacks on military

installations, women and children are now increasingly being used to attack military checkpoints. (It should be noted that the term “Boko Haram militants” is used loosely here as the group, like al Qaeda, has shifting and often unclear lines between members, affiliates, and those who benefit from the general chaos they perpetuate). One reason given for this tactic in particular is the inherent reluctance by police and officers manning the checkpoints to shoot at young children and the difficulty in determining, especially with young girls who are wearing the hijab and carrying a backpack, whether the child is a threat or not.

The spike in the use of suicide bombings and attacks on soft targets rather than direct assaults using conventional weapons could also be evidence of the group’s dwindling resources, as reports of fighters riding horses rather than traveling in vehicles and utilizing weapons such as crude knives and machetes instead of guns seems to attest. According to one interview with a Nigerian soldier, the use of suicide bombers is a cheap and terrifying way to wage a war, and also has the effect of sowing seeds of suspicion and fear among and between citizens, a tactic that furthers the group’s aim to unspool the thread of society. To be certain, in reports received from the field through the NSRP Observatory Platform as well as the P4P Map, over the course of late 2014 to the end of 2015, targets increasingly included mosques, churches, schools, petrol stations, markets and, as noted in the beginning, IDP camps.

In recent months, some analysts have argued that the Boko Haram embrace of a terror campaign targeting civilians in particular is a nod to global jihad and the group’s new allegiance with the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. While this does hold certain merit and, like the Islamic State, Boko Haram appears to be media savvy and courts publicity surrounding its attacks, it is insufficient. For one, while the Islamic State frequently deploys suicide bombers, women are expressly forbidden from taking

part in such attacks and there have not, as of yet, been reports of young children tasked with such deadly missions, although the group has been condemned for training and using child soldiers. Moreover, the Boko Haram merger with the Islamic State could well have been part of a wider diversionary tactic to distract from what, at that point, was the beginning of several key territorial losses. While there is no doubt that both groups have embraced the use of barbaric attacks against civilians, the increased use of suicide bombers by Boko Haram might also contain elements of defeat as well as defiance.

From an ideological perspective, in looking beyond the specific tactics currently employed by Boko Haram in its use of women and children as suicide bombers, it is also worth noting the possible overall effect of the insurgency on the local psyche as both a means and a possible motivation. The role of the ideology of Boko Haram — which goes beyond rejecting Western education or democracy and is deeply intertwined with other social and political narratives centered around state-perpetrated exclusion, victimization, and isolation — is often cited as finding deep resonance among elements of local populations, who may nonetheless reject their methods. This ideology, described in detail in the January 2016 Brookings Institute paper by Alex Thurston called, “The Disease of Unbelief: Boko Haram’s Religious and Political Worldview,” is complex and adaptive and has gone through various evolutions since its founding in 2002 and the start of the insurgency in 2009. It has been deeply influenced not only by splits within the Salafist movements in northern Nigeria, but also by national and regional politics, including the perception of deep economic marginalization of the north when compared to the oil-rich, and largely Christian, south of the country.

The response of the Nigerian government to the insurgency, in particular the state of emergency imposed in three north-eastern states from mid-2013 to late 2014, was to



use overwhelming force which, in many cases, resulted in high numbers of civilian casualties and the wholesale destruction of property. These tactics, combined with the historical belief in the marginalization and victimization of the north by successive governments, fed into what Thurston describes as the movement's seizure and monopoly of the narrative of grievance and reprisal. From 2009 onwards, the movement gained traction not only as a way to preserve and deepen the role of Islam in the north, but also as the voice of the wider political grievances of certain northeastern states against the Nigerian government, writ large.

When considering the role of agency and choice in the decision of individuals to tacitly or explicitly support Boko Haram, the larger history of the movement and its origins cannot be overlooked, nor how deeply it has become entrenched in society. It was stated at one point during a group interview that everyone presently sitting in the room either "knew or was related to someone in Boko Haram." Others asserted that while the narrative often utilized by the previous government of the movement being imposed on people from the outside was true in some cases, it was certainly not true in all. It was noted that while parts of the ideology of Boko Haram, particularly its complete rejection of education and civic participation, may not necessarily find as much traction as the North has historically been a place of higher learning, its narrative about the isolation and denigration of the region and its inhabitants often did. The initial and prolonged treatment of the movement by the Nigerian government as a security problem to be dealt with using a forceful response was feeding into that very narrative and attempts to counter it and advocate for other solutions were made much more difficult. It was also useful propaganda, gaining adherents who are willing to sacrifice themselves, or their children, in the name of reprisals meant to inflict mass casualties not only on the government, but also those seen as sympathizers, whether Christian, Muslim, military or civilian.

The election of President Buhari to office in April 2015, and the decision to move the military base of operations from the south of the country to Maiduguri, has had both negative and positive impacts, according to those interviewed in Borno and in Abuja. The increased presence of the military in and around large civilian population centers has lent a degree of security to some while, for others, it has had the effect of moving the frontline of the battlefield right to their doorstep. As noted, the narrative of northern oppression by successive southern — and Christian — Nigerian governments may be beginning to lose some traction and new initiatives to counter some of the ideological effects of the insurgency (such as counter-radicalization programs for those captured or surrendering along with more psycho-social services for female and child abductees) may yet prove effective. Nevertheless, the root causes of the conflict, including deep-seated historical grievances compounded by grinding poverty and lack of opportunity, will not be solved so quickly. In addition, although recent military campaigns against Boko Haram seem to have focused much more intently on preventing civilian casualties and prioritizing the rescue of hostages, past injustices, including the reported widespread abuse of human rights by both the military and the CJTF, remain fresh in the minds of many and must be addressed.

### Preventing Further Damage

A concern repeatedly voiced in interviews conducted by FFP in Maiduguri centered around the issue of the prevention of further damage to traumatized civilian populations while also ensuring local ownership of the narrative of what has transpired as well as the strategies needed to bring peace. On the issue of the prevention of further damage, several individuals interviewed in Maiduguri as well as Abuja noted the concern that shedding light on the role of agency and choice among civilians ran the risk of portraying them all as Boko Haram sympathizers. In the past, and in other conflicts outside of

Nigeria, the portrayal of a sympathetic civilian population has led to the decision by less scrupulous politicians and military commanders that certain lives don't matter as much as others. One researcher voiced his view of a precedent set in Afghanistan, where civilian populations seen to be sympathetic to the Taliban were themselves seen as enemy combatants early on in the conflict. Others noted the widespread abuses against civilians in the northeast in the initial stages of the military assault that accompanied the state of emergency declared in 2013. Specifically, it was mentioned that many believed young men and teenage boys were indiscriminately killed (if not directly targeted) to prevent them from joining the ranks of Boko Haram, regardless of whether the area in question had itself been forcibly seized by the group or the young men had any known affiliation whatsoever.

The collateral damage from the insurgency, not only widespread human rights abuses but also the destruction of property, further had disastrous impacts on women. Many, who were left widowed or lost most male members of their families, were suddenly rendered alone and vulnerable with few if any resources for support. Uprooted and abandoned children that UNICEF estimated as numbering close to one million during 2015, are also highly vulnerable and, in the words of one NGO worker from Borno State, these children represent a potential "lost generation" in Nigeria. These women and children face unique threats and, as mentioned earlier, can be highly vulnerable to coercion and manipulation not only by Boko Haram, but other dangerous elements of society such as criminal gangs. A rise in human trafficking, especially of young women and children from the conflict-affected areas in the north, has also been noted, according to one aid worker volunteering services in the IDP camps. In short, the reach of the insurgency is beginning to stretch well beyond the known and immediate effects of the conflict, and may have impacts on the region as a whole for decades to come.

Finally, it was frequently underscored by those interviewed in Borno state as well as others that the need to include local populations in understanding the dynamics fueling such phenomena as the use of women and children as suicide bombers was paramount. While it was acknowledged that access to these populations at present is limited at best, and the security situation makes it difficult for humanitarian aid workers and researchers to get to affected civilians, the overreliance on sources from outside the conflict, or even outside the country itself, is not optimal. As an influx of internal and external military, intelligence, humanitarian and development actors focus their efforts on the regions affected by the insurgency, a growing concern among civilian populations remains whether they will be entirely overlooked in the process. Particularly when it comes to

helping to heal the damage caused by years of brutal conflict waged against vulnerable groups like women and children, a failure to include them in the design and implementation of programs and processes meant to heal trauma and bring about sustainable peace could cause more harm than good. Efforts already underway in Borno as well as other larger towns have realized some success in helping to reintegrate young women into society as well as teach them valuable skills that they can rely upon in the future. These efforts should be studied and expanded where possible and duplicated in other areas to help build stability for the longer term.

In the shorter term, however, more of an effort to understand and counter the narrative of violent extremism employed by Boko Haram may give deeper insights into

the devastating manifestations of the insurgency in the form of women and young girls being used as human weapons. In addition to changing the prevailing narrative that often too narrowly focuses on these women and girls as victims, more needs to be done to understand the role of agency and choice in the process, including the choices made by parents and guardians of young children deployed as suicide bombers. At present, these factors are rarely examined using a more integrated and holistic analysis that goes beyond violent tactics and casualty numbers. The continued failure of this approach not only puts at risk the lives of women and children who may soon be added to the staggering numbers of suicide bombers killed in the conflict, but gives little hope for efforts at prevention aimed to halt this tragic trend in Nigeria.

## Recommendations

1. Preliminary data suggests a possible correlation between the reduction of fatalities in the north-east and the election of a northern, APC, candidate to the Presidency. A deeper exploration into the linkages between these variables and the possible effects on the recruiting efficacy of Boko Haram should be undertaken.
2. While the use of female suicide bombers is not new globally, an understanding of what influences a suicide bomber's choice and/or the tactics used to compel their participation has been grossly under-examined and needs more research and attention.
3. The use of children as suicide bombers is on the rise in northern Nigeria and indications point to a complex mix of social and context-specific pressures. More dedicated research, including interviews with parents and affected communities, is needed to understand this growing trend.
4. More funding and support is needed to assist the government of Nigeria and Nigerian NGOs working in the North and North-Central parts of the country with the provision of psycho-social services to women and children affected by the insurgency. In particular, programs aimed at de-radicalization, skills-training, and community integration should be enhanced and made more widely accessible. Despite the years of conflict, there remains a strong and vibrant civil society throughout most of Nigeria; they are one of the country's biggest assets and should be used as such.
5. The "grievance and reprisal" narrative, as articulated by Alex Thurston, that is employed by Boko Haram has complex social, political and historical roots that cannot be divorced from the current manifestations of violence or the tactics employed by the group. Failing to understand these dynamics and solicit the views of local populations in how to effectively counter them will invariably lead to ineffective prevention and mitigation.
6. The Nigerian government should make an effort to acknowledge and investigate accusations made not only by civilian populations but also international human rights groups into human rights violations committed by the Nigerian military as part of a series of confidence-building measures. This has the potential to help disempower the current narrative of the government purposely targeting Muslims.
7. There are plenty of resources that currently exist within Nigeria itself that hold possible lessons learned and best practices in countering violent insurgency, particularly from the Niger Delta. Efforts should be made to engage expertise that currently exists within the country rather than relying on "imported experts" which can have the effect of dissuading ownership and buy-in for sustainable peace. Additionally, engaging expertise from the south of the country could also go a long way in helping to repair what Boko Haram exploits as an insurmountable rift between the north and south of Nigeria.