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CHANGE

Islamist Extremist Strategy: Suicide Bombing

CO-EXISTENCE

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The first modern suicide bombing, in Lebanon in 1981, ushered in a new era of terrorist violence. Since then, Islamist extremist groups have manipulated the concept of *istishhad*, or martyrdom, to build an ideological justification for waging violent jihad.¹ Extremists have perverted this concept, in which a person dies to testify his or her faith in God, to allow for horrific violence against targets including civilians. In 2017, the GEM documented at least 888 suicide attacks and attempted attacks by 1,643 bombers in 27 countries (see figure 4.1).

Extremist groups have crafted this ideological framework to resonate with and reward individuals fighting within groups and those seeking to join. Violent Salafi-jihadi groups have long declared that suicide bombers are heroic martyrs who will be honoured in life after death. ISIS has used its claim that it “loves death more than you love life” to establish itself as a group that can open the route to paradise for its militants.² Many violent Islamist extremist organisations exploit Quranic passages that present the afterlife. GEM data from 2017 also show two major groups using women—a matter of much debate among jihadis—to carry out suicide attacks that year.

1 See also Emman El-Badawy, Milo Comerford and Peter Welby, *Inside the Jihadi Mind: Understanding Ideology and Propaganda*, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 6 October 2015, <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/inside-jihadi-mind-understanding-ideology-and-propaganda>.

2 Atika Shubert, Margot Haddad and Bryony Jones, “Escaping ISIS: How French teen got free of terrorist recruiters”, CNN News, 24 January 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/01/19/europe/escaping-isis-paris-attacker-radicalized-teen/index.html>.

This fourth part of the Global Extremism Monitor 2017 exposes the extent to which violent Islamists use suicide bombings to instill fear. The monitor documented at least 888 suicide attacks and attempted attacks in 27 countries.

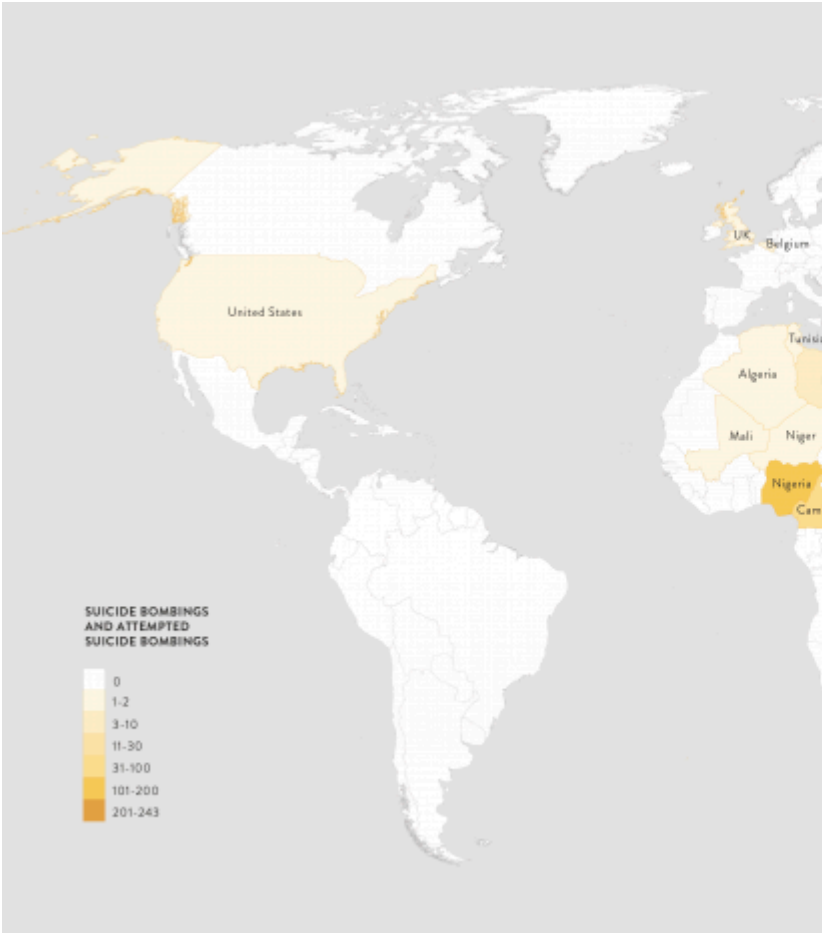
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The use of suicide missions was born out of a need to strike a balance between the resources available to violent Islamists and their stated objectives. The contexts in which these violent Islamists operate, and the capabilities afforded to them, have resulted in groups opting to weaponise their own militants. Suicide attacks are a low-cost, high-impact tool that allows terrorists to kill large numbers of their designated enemies while taking advantage of complex, often urban, terrain. This tactic has transformed and gridlocked conflicts in countries such as Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, creating formidable violent forces that continue to use human bombs to terrorise.

COUNTRIES AFFECTED BY SUICIDE BOMBINGS

Twenty-seven countries were affected by suicide bombings in 2017, according to GEM data. Zoom in on the map below to see a further breakdown. The locations of individual incidents are approximate.

Figure 4.1: Map of Suicide Bombings and Attempted Suicide Bombings Worldwide, 2017 (zoom in to see more detail)



	Country	Number of Suicide Bombings
1	Iraq	243
2	Syria	209
3	Nigeria	127

	Country	Number of Suicide Bombings
4	Afghanistan	107
5	Cameroon	62
6	Somalia	34
7	Pakistan	32
8	Yemen	14
9	Egypt	13
10=	Bangladesh	8
10=	India	8
12	Libya	7
13	Saudi Arabia	4
14=	Algeria	2
14=	Iran	2
14=	Jordan	2
14=	Lebanon	2
14=	Mali	2
14=	Russia	2
20=	Belgium	1
20=	Indonesia	1
20=	Israel	1
20=	Niger	1

	Country	Number of Suicide Bombings
20=	Tunisia	1
20=	Turkey	1
20=	United Kingdom	1
20=	United States	1

USE OF SUICIDE ATTACKS BY GROUP

The GEM recorded 37 violent extremist groups that used suicide bombers to conduct attacks in 2017. The GEM found that 69 per cent of suicide assaults occurred in country-wide conflict zones, emphasising how violent extremists have exploited the tactic in large-scale offensives. The groups discussed here are the most prolific users of suicide bombers. The GEM analysed a sample in which each group launched at least 30 attacks in the year and dedicated 25 per cent or more of its violence to suicide missions. These parameters allow for a revealing analysis of one of the most feared tactics in violent Islamist extremism.

BOKO HARAM

Suicide bombings were an integral part of Boko Haram's violent campaign in 2017. The GEM found that the group conducted 189 suicide assaults in the year, dedicating 43 per cent of its attacks to these missions. Boko Haram's expansionist objectives meant that it deployed suicide bombers in three countries: Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad. The GEM monitored Boko Haram's consistent use of suicide bombings to uncover the reality of a group that has weaponised martyrdom.

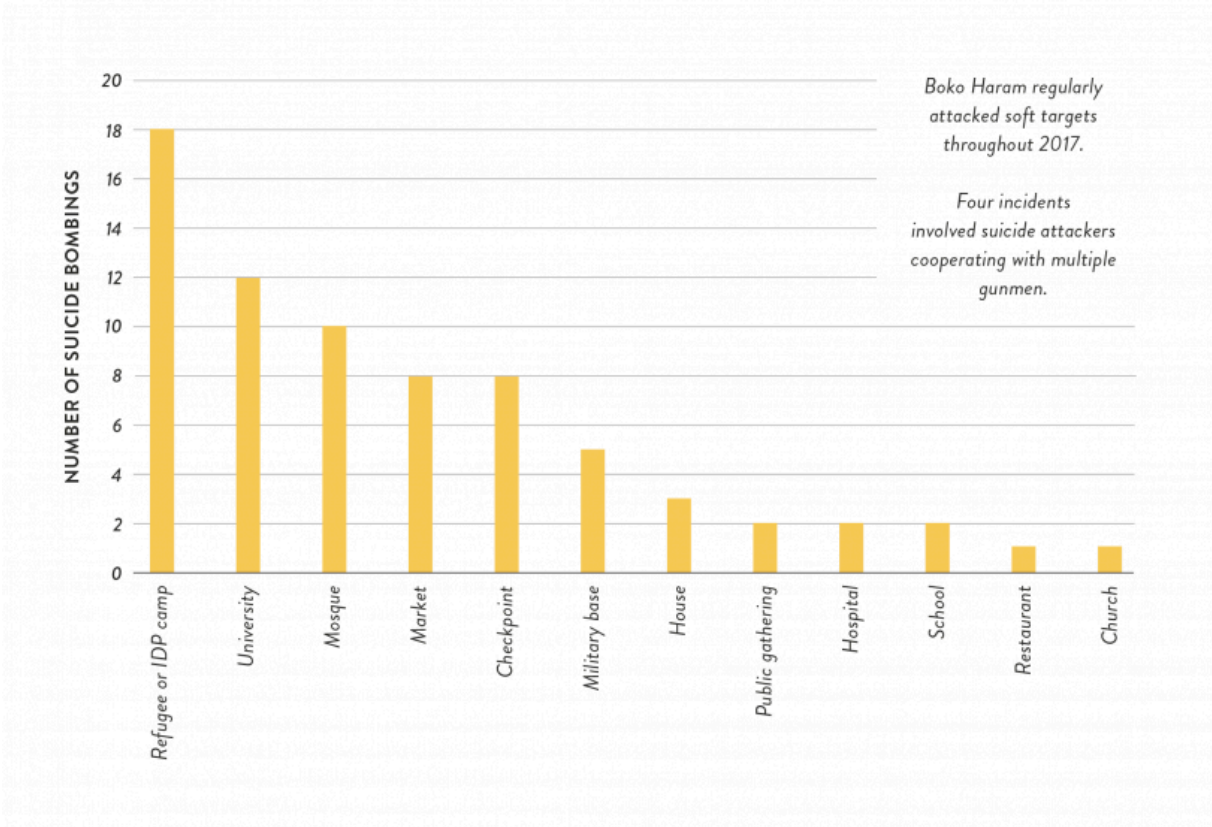
Boko Haram's suicide assaults killed 449 people in 2017. On average, the group conducted 16 suicide attacks each month and killed two people per incident. Eighty-one suicide bombers were unsuccessful in their missions, because they either detonated prematurely or were killed or arrested by security forces before they could carry out their attack.

Boko Haram's suicide strategy is characterised by frequent but crude attacks, with varied effects. This strategy aims to undermine key components of the public space in Nigeria and surrounding countries, reflected in the group's violence against civilians. Suicide bombing allows a group's members to disguise themselves among the public, causing maximum violence and spreading terror.

Eighty-three per cent of Boko Haram's assaults in 2017 were directed at civilians and soft targets (see figure 4.2). Eight of Boko

Haram’s suicide attacks were directed at marketplaces. Throughout 2017, Boko Haram directed ten suicide assaults at mosques and 15 at camps for refugees and internally displaced people in Nigeria, Cameroon and Niger. Boko Haram’s suicide bombers also consistently targeted educational institutions in 2017, reflecting the group’s ideological opposition to secular education. Seventeen suicide assailants directed attacks at the University of Maiduguri in Borno state.

Figure 4.2: Scenes of Synchronised Boko Haram Suicide Bombings, 2017



The frequency of suicide attacks is a sign of Boko Haram’s desire to consolidate amid claims by Nigeria’s army that it had defeated the group. In addition, the group’s front-line losses in battles with the military have been a factor in the sustained use of suicide bombings.

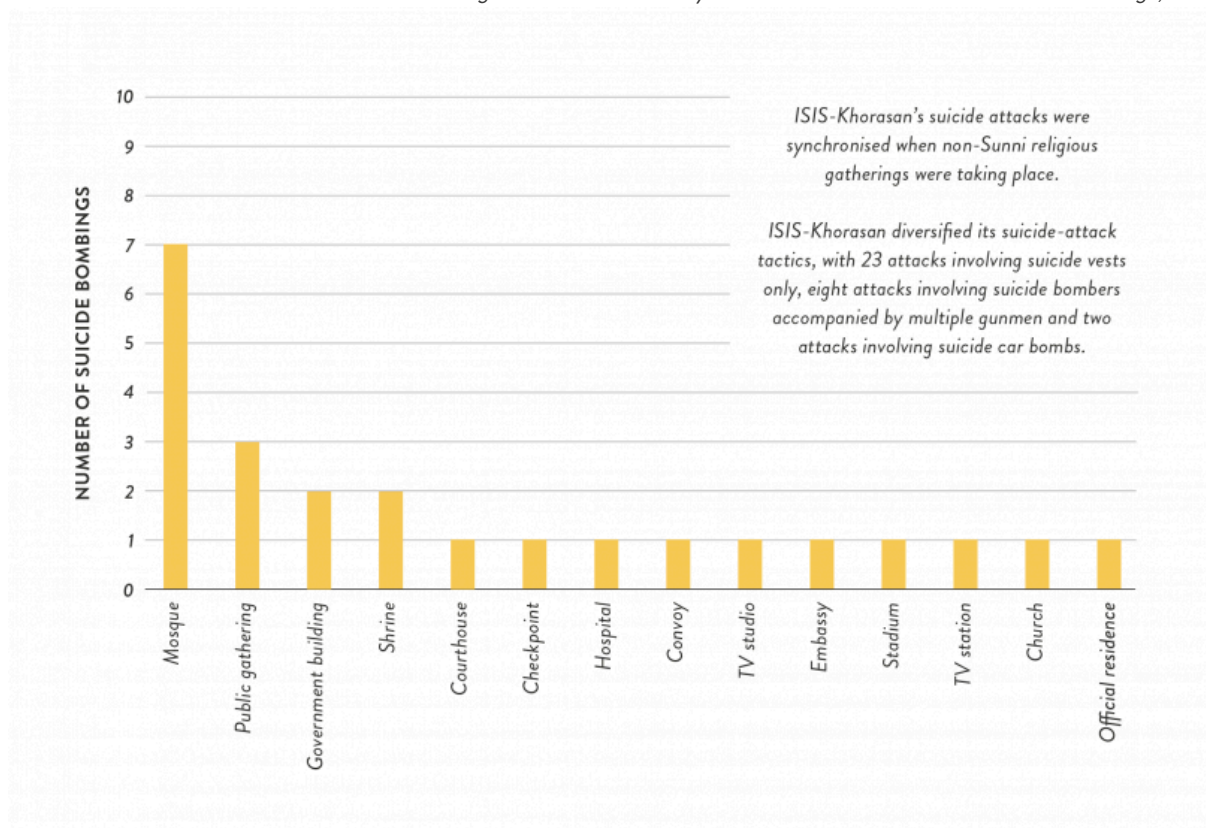
ISIS-KHORASAN

ISIS-Khorasan, which is active in Afghanistan and Pakistan, has used suicide bombings to target its enemies with lethal consequences. The group launched 33 suicide attacks to kill 504 people in 2017, including 480 civilians. Forty-two per cent of ISIS-Khorasan's attacks in both countries were composed of suicide assaults, killing on average 15 people per suicide mission. Eighty-five per cent of ISIS-Khorasan's suicide bombings occurred in Afghanistan, where the group is predominantly based.

ISIS-Khorasan's sectarian ideology was manifested in ten suicide attacks on Shia and Sufi civilians. Five of the assaults in Afghanistan targeted worshippers at Shia mosques. In August 2017, a suicide bomber attacked a Shia mosque in Kabul and gunmen stormed the building, firing at civilians. The assault killed 40 people. Across the border in Pakistan, the group killed 130 people in suicide attacks against Sufi Muslims. At least 90 civilians were killed in February after an ISIS suicide bomber attacked a Sufi shrine in Sindh province. In October, the group killed 20 people when a suicide assailant struck Sufi worshippers in Balochistan.

The group also carried out six suicide attacks on government targets in Afghanistan, including courthouses, embassies and officials' residences (see figure 4.3). In October, a suicide bomber attacked a diplomatic area in Kabul, killing eight people. A suicide assault on a political rally in November killed 11. The group's use of suicide bombings against government officials and political buildings is symptomatic of its desire to undermine the democratic Afghan state and an opportunity to position itself as one of the country's leading violent Islamist groups.

Figure 4.3: Scenes of Synchronised ISIS-Khorasan Suicide Bombings, 2017

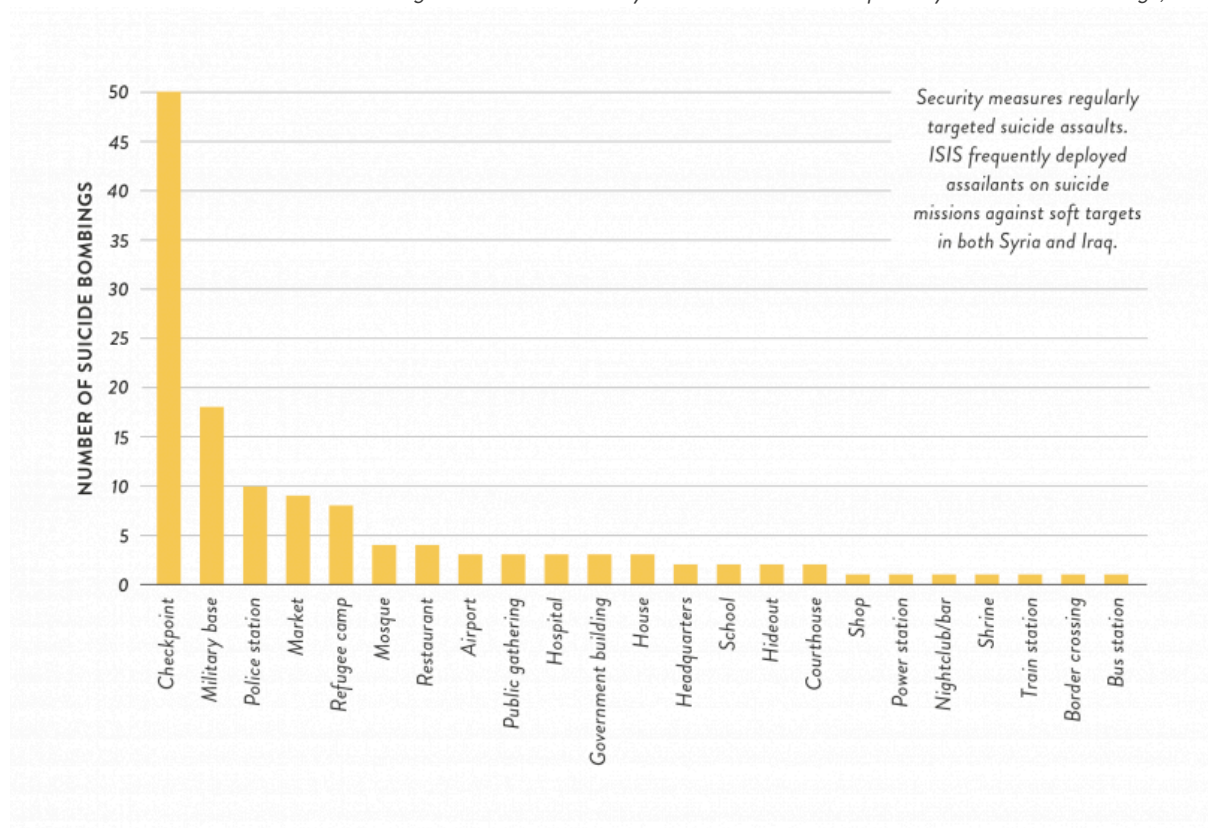


ISIS IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

ISIS used suicide bombings to wage high levels of violence in Iraq and Syria. The GEM recorded 411 ISIS suicide attacks in the two conflict-ridden countries (see figure 4.4). This violence killed 2,299 people, including 876 civilians and 939 members of the security forces. It is important to acknowledge similarities and disparities between the two countries and to explore and compare their local dynamics, to avoid misinterpreting the group's violence in the two countries as equal and homogeneous.

The GEM found that 93 per cent of ISIS's suicide attacks in Syria were aimed at security forces, nonstate actors and other extremists. In Iraq, 76 per cent of the group's suicide bombings were either attacks on security targets or incidents of group infighting. Despite this focus, scores of civilians were killed in both countries as a result of the actions of a group that has made martyrdom a defining component of its violence.

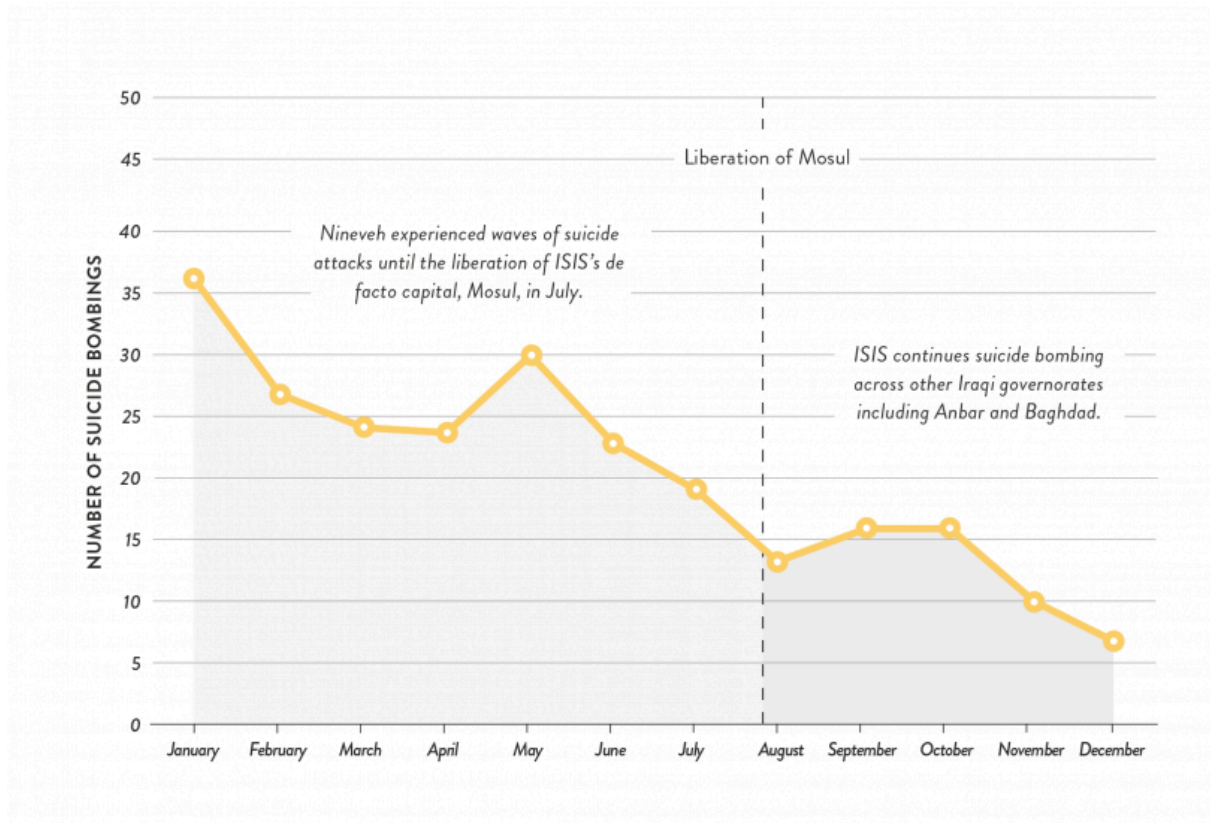
Figure 4.4: Scenes of Synchronised ISIS in Iraq and Syria Suicide Bombings, 2017



Iraq

ISIS launched 243 suicide attacks in Iraq in 2017, killing 771 people. On average, 20 suicide attacks took place in the country each month. Over 74 per cent of the suicide assaults occurred in the first half of the year, mirroring increasing security operations to remove the group from northern Iraq (see figure 4.5).

Figure 4.5: Timeline of ISIS Suicide Bombings in Iraq, 2017



Thirty-seven per cent of ISIS's suicide bombers in Iraq carried out their missions in Nineveh, the province in which ISIS's former stronghold of Mosul is located. ISIS's suicide-bombing tactic in Mosul concentrated on sending numerous assailants in waves to target oncoming armed forces. On average, ISIS deployed three suicide bombers per attack in Nineveh. In March, police forces repelled ten approaching ISIS suicide bombers in the Dawasa area of Mosul. ISIS sent five suicide bombers to attack Popular Mobilisation Forces in the city in October, killing four. As ISIS came under increasing military pressure and its territorial grip was loosened, the group used suicide bombings in an increasing and defensive manner. This strategic development indicates that the group became more desperate and its resources more depleted as it was forced to use its militants as weapons.

In contrast, the GEM recorded an average of one ISIS bomber per suicide attack in Baghdad. Despite lower numbers of assailants in the capital, the group killed 152 civilians there. Baghdad, the deadliest capital city in the world for violent Islamist extremism

according to the GEM, was attacked by 39 ISIS suicide bombers in 2017. In total, only 7 per cent of the ISIS terrorist attacks to hit Baghdad were suicide assaults. However, these suicide missions were characteristically lethal, accounting for more than one-third of all deaths from ISIS's violence in Baghdad.

Twenty-five per cent of the suicide attacks in Baghdad recorded by the GEM were sectarian in nature. ISIS's suicide assaults are a manifestation of its ideological opposition to Shia Muslims living in Iraq and beyond. In January, ISIS claimed responsibility for a suicide car bomb that killed 34 people, saying it had aimed to kill a "gathering of Shia Muslims".³ During Ramadan, the group directed two suicide car bombs at popular areas in central Baghdad, leading to the deaths of 30 people. Baghdad's demographic make-up is predominantly Shia, suggesting many of the suicide assaults in the city may have been motivated by sectarian hatred.

Syria

ISIS launched 164 suicide attacks involving 324 assailants across Syria in 2017. The group's territorial reach fluctuated throughout the year, due to various counter-extremism measures to remove the group from the country. Much as in the battle to rid Mosul of ISIS, most of the group's Syrian suicide attacks targeted security forces. Eighty-five per cent of its attacks were aimed at militaries and nonstate actors, including Kurdish militias. In Raqqa, this was manifested in suicide assaults targeting the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Two suicide bombers in the Ajrawi area of Raqqa killed 30 SDF members in May. In the eastern province of Deir ez-Zor, 20 per cent of ISIS's suicide attacks targeted military bases and checkpoints. ISIS has adapted its use of suicide bombings in Syria to the evolving fighting.

Similarly, ISIS's suicide attacks against civilians in Syria are symptomatic of a country engulfed by conflict. The group used martyrdom to attack and stem the flow of civilians fleeing its shrinking territories. In 2017, suicide attacks at refugee camps in Syria and on the Jordanian border killed 178 civilians. In November, more than 100 people were killed in an ISIS suicide car bombing that targeted displaced people in Deir ez-Zor. ISIS killed 50 civilians

³ "IS conflict: Baghdad suicide car bomb blast kills 35", BBC, 2 January 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-38488091>.

in October when three suicide car bombers hit a refugee camp elsewhere in Deir ez-Zor. At the Rukban displacement camp in Jordan, a suicide car bombing killed four members of security forces and seven civilians at a camp for displaced people in January. ISIS's use of suicide bombings is exacerbating a displacement crisis in a country the UN has described as the "world's biggest producer of refugees".⁴

AL-QAEDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

The suicide-bombing campaign of another group in Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), attempted to undermine security forces in a country that has been enveloped by violent Islamist extremism. Al-Qaeda's largest branch dedicated 31 per cent of its activity in 2017 to suicide bombings. The majority of AQAP's suicide activity targeted forces of the UN-backed Yemeni government and its allies, killing 43 security personnel over the year.

Fifty per cent of AQAP's suicide missions took place in the port city of Abyan, the centre of the group's Yemeni insurgency. In October, the group used suicide car bombs to attack members of the al-Hizam Brigade, a militia trained in the United Arab Emirates, killing four of the militia members and wounding ten. AQAP quickly claimed the incident, saying the security branch was targeted due to "[the United Arab Emirates'] role in fighting Islam and Muslims".⁵

In February, an AQAP suicide car bomber killed three people, including a child, when the car was driven at a sports and culture club in a Houthi-held district of Bayda province. Houthi militants fired at the oncoming car, causing it to detonate before reaching its target. Such an attack against a rival Islamist militant group was an anomaly in Yemen in 2017. However, Yemen has become a crowded theatre of conflict with many competing actors vying for control.

4 "Refugees", United Nations, <http://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/refugees/index.html>.

5 Ludovico Carlino, "Increase in AQAP attacks in Yemen's Abyan province indicates ineffectiveness of UAE operations against jihadists' guerrilla tactics", IHS Jane's Country Risk Daily Report, 24 October 2017, <http://www.janes.com/article/75153/increase-in-aqap-attacks-in-yemen-s-abyan-province-indicates-ineffectiveness-of-uae-operations-against-jihadists-guerrilla-tactics>.

AQAP is immersed in a violent campaign against security forces and has used suicide bombings in an attempt to weaken enemies it sees as wrongfully governing on its desired territory.

THE TALIBAN

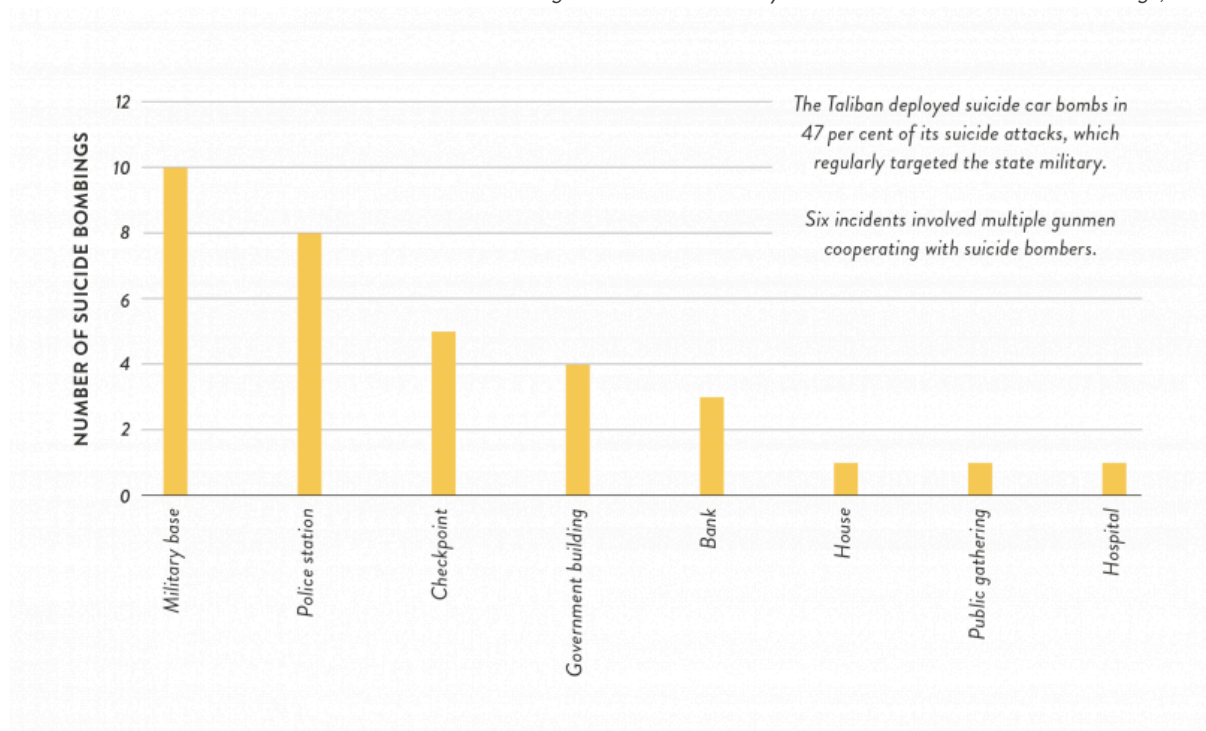
The Taliban has historically positioned itself against suicide tactics, but the group has incorporated such bombings as its warfare has evolved.⁶ In 2017, the Taliban dedicated 13 per cent of its activity to suicide missions. Ninety-six Taliban suicide bombers carried out attacks in 2017, killing 617 people, including 232 civilians. The Taliban has been a powerful and violent fighting force in Afghanistan since it fell from power in 2001, engaging with sophisticated armed forces on the battlefield. The group, which has sought to position itself as a viable governing force, has deployed willing martyrs against national and international troops, to devastating effect.

Eighty-three per cent of the Taliban's suicide assaults in 2017 were directed at military and police targets (see figure 4.6). The group focused 30 per cent of its suicide attacks on security sites, including military bases, checkpoints and police stations. In April, two suicide bombers and multiple gunmen, disguised as security personnel and driving military vehicles, attacked an army base in Mazar-i-Sharif. The coordinated assault killed 140 Afghan soldiers, making it one of the deadliest attacks at a military site in 2017. Three days later, the Afghan minister of defence and army chief of staff resigned, following a swell of public anger and fatigue.⁷ This assault seemingly fulfilled Taliban objectives to erode Afghan stability.

6 Brian Glyn Williams, "Mullah Omar's Missiles: A Field Report on Suicide Bombers in Afghanistan", Middle East Policy Council 15, no. 4, <https://www.mepc.org/journal/mullah-omars-missiles-field-report-suicide-bombers-afghanistan>.

7 Mujib Mashal and Helene Cooper, "2 Top Afghanistan Military Officials Resign After Taliban Attack", New York Times, 24 April 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/24/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-defense-minister-resigns.html>.

Figure 4.6: Scenes of Synchronised Taliban Suicide Bombings, 2017



In 2017, the Taliban deployed nine suicide bombers in six attacks on government targets, killing 104 people. Half of these incidents occurred in Kabul. In January, a twin suicide bombing on the National Assembly in the capital killed 46 people. Most of those killed were parliamentary workers. Also in Kabul, a suicide car bomb targeted a bus carrying government officials in July, killing 30. The Taliban has used suicide bombers to pursue and attack a government it deems illegitimate, in an attempt to regain power in the country.

The Taliban's desire to govern the nation has encouraged the group to appeal to the Afghan people. This has affected its attitude to the use of suicide assaults and the propaganda surrounding them. The Taliban has condemned ISIS's use of suicide bombers. For example, in November, when ISIS claimed a suicide attack on a Pashto-language broadcaster in Kabul that killed two civilians and wounded 20, the Taliban was quick to deny involvement. Pashto is an Afghan official language that is spoken by the Taliban and in areas the group controls. The group has at times endeavoured to distance itself from suicide attacks that it believes may disillusion the public.

Despite overarching strategies and objectives such as governing the Afghan nation and removing foreign troops, the Taliban is fractured, with a number of competing factions.⁸ Suicide bombings highlight internal divisions and infighting in the group. This has often manifested itself in factions contesting leaders and struggling to control territories, a trend that is indicative of the Taliban's size and scope and the length of its insurgency. In 2017, there were three suicide attacks by Taliban members on other factions of the group. In June, a suicide bomber hit a checkpoint run by rival Taliban members in Helmand province, killing nine militants.

THE PAKISTANI TALIBAN

The Pakistani Taliban used 25 suicide bombers to conduct mass violence in Pakistan in 2017. The group conducted 18 suicide attacks, which made up a quarter of its overall violent activity in Pakistan. These suicide assaults killed 68 people, including 34 members of security forces and 34 civilians. The group seeks to destroy the Pakistani state and its military, and replace the current apparatus with its interpretation of sharia law. Seventy-eight per cent of the group's suicide activity was directed at security forces or the Pakistani government.

The Pakistani Taliban used suicide bombings in 2017 to erode the stability and functionality of the state. This was borne out in April, when a Pakistani Taliban suicide bomber struck a government team in Lahore conducting a state census, killing four soldiers and two data collectors. Similarly, the group attempted to use suicide attacks to assassinate two prominent members of civil society in 2017. In July, a suicide assassination killed a district police officer and his security guard in the Pakistani-Afghan border town of Chaman, Balochistan. These actions reveal how the Pakistani Taliban can impede the state's ability to perform its duty to its citizens.

⁸ Matthew Dupee, "Red on Red: Analyzing Afghanistan's Intra-Insurgency Violence", Combating Terrorism Center 11, no. 1 (January 2018), <https://ctc.usma.edu/red-red-analyzing-afghanistans-intra-insurgency-violence/>.

The GEM recorded 100 suicide assaults conducted by 181 female militants in 2017. Female suicide bombers were deployed by two groups in five countries: Cameroon, Iraq, Niger, Nigeria and Syria. On average, four out of five of these attackers successfully detonated their explosives during their operations. These assaults killed 279 people, 94 per cent of whom were civilians. Boko Haram deployed the most female suicide bombers, while changes in ISIS's ideological parameters meant that the group also enlisted female assailants. All of these Islamist militant organisations adhere to Salafi-jihadi teachings, which largely prohibit women's participation on the battlefield.

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and establishing themselves as resilient members of the global violent jihadi movement. The use of female suicide bombers not only signals a shift in tactics but also emphasises an evolution in the collective mindset of violent extremist groups.

ISIS IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

ISIS has historically prohibited the participation of women in combat, in accordance with traditional Salafi-jihadi teachings. The group has relied on men to fight, while women have been expected to remain at home to raise the next generation of militant jihadi men and of women who carry out domestic work. However, as the group was increasingly on the defensive and under attack from the international anti-ISIS coalition and local forces, its territory and manpower were diminished and women were called to arms. In October, ISIS declared it an “obligation” for women to participate in jihad, urging them to “prepare themselves to defend their religion by sacrificing themselves by Allah”.⁹

ISIS was the largest deployer of female suicide bombers in the Middle East and North Africa in 2017. The GEM recorded seven female ISIS suicide bombers in Iraq, illustrating a profound shift in the group’s ideological strategy, as it had not used female suicide bombers before. Three of these assaults were carried out successfully, killing 30 civilians and one member of the Iraqi army, while four bombers were arrested before their explosives detonated. Four of the female ISIS bombers in Iraq attempted suicide attacks in Mosul, the group’s former stronghold.

In July, two female suicide bombers who were hiding among civilians fleeing Mosul attacked Iraqi troops, killing one soldier and wounding several others. A Turkish woman was detained in September while attempting to carry out a suicide assault on troops deployed in the northern Iraqi province of Nineveh. A woman was arrested in February while carrying out a suicide attack at a girls’ school in Mosul. The GEM also identified ISIS’s use of female suicide

⁹ Lizzie Dearden, “Isis calls on women to fight and launch terror attacks for first time”, Independent, 6 October 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-war-syria-iraq-women-call-to-arms-islamic-state-terror-attacks-propaganda-change-ban-frontline-a7986986.html>.

bombers in Syria. In September, two female assailants launched an assault on security forces in Uqayribat and Homs alongside two male counterparts, killing only themselves.¹⁰

The nine ISIS female suicide bombers documented by the GEM confirm how this deadliest of extremist groups has modified its tactics and ideological stance. ISIS's desire to remain a force means that it has needed to adapt to increased counter-extremism measures. Iraq and Syria have been plagued by ISIS since 2014, but the group is now a transnational entity comprising 13 distinct affiliates that all adhere to its Salafi-jihadi ideology. These entities are likely to emulate the tactics of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, increasing the number of women being deployed as suicide bombers in other countries.

BOKO HARAM

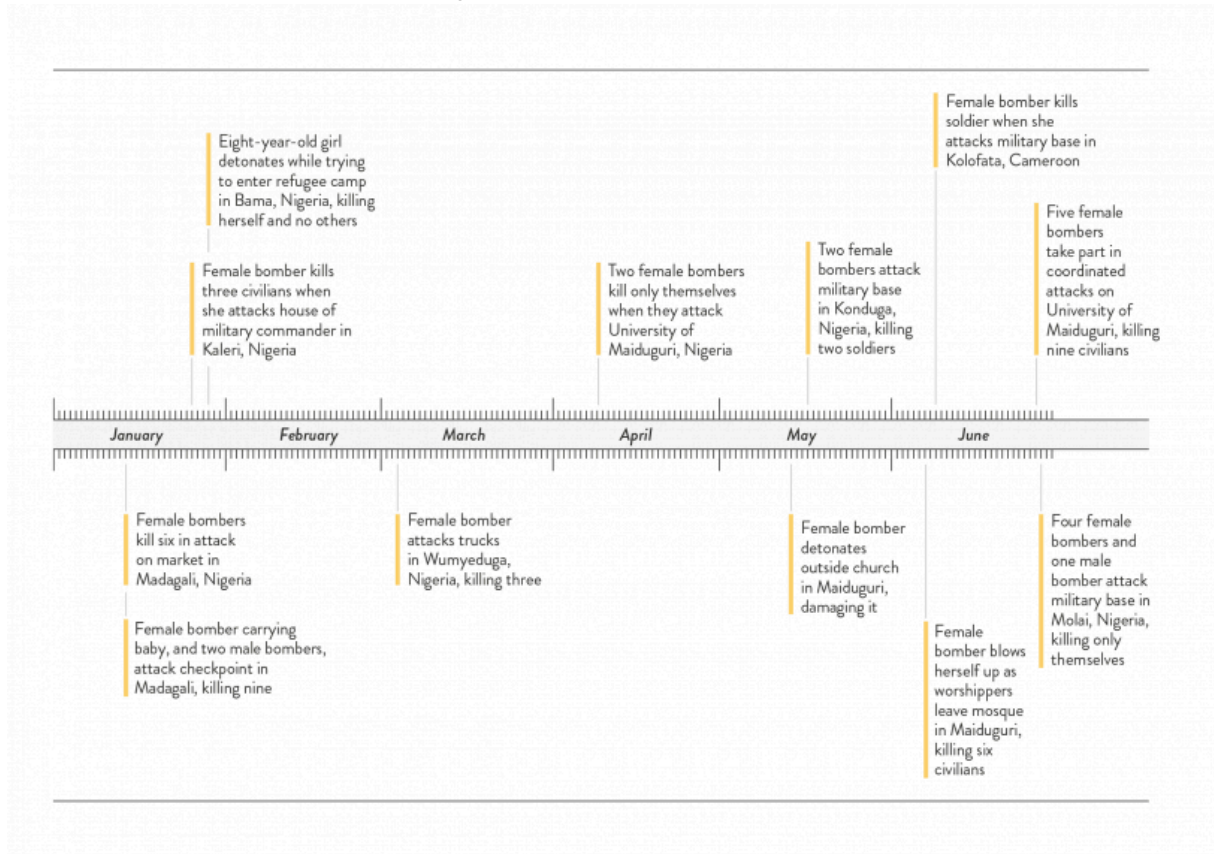
Boko Haram used more female suicide bombers than any other group in 2017. The group offers the clearest example of how extremist organisations are willing to drastically change their operations. Boko Haram conducted its first suicide bombing in 2011, striking the Abuja police headquarters. The assailant was a male member of the group who detonated his vehicle killing five people.¹¹ It took another three years for the first female suicide bomber to detonate herself on behalf of Boko Haram.

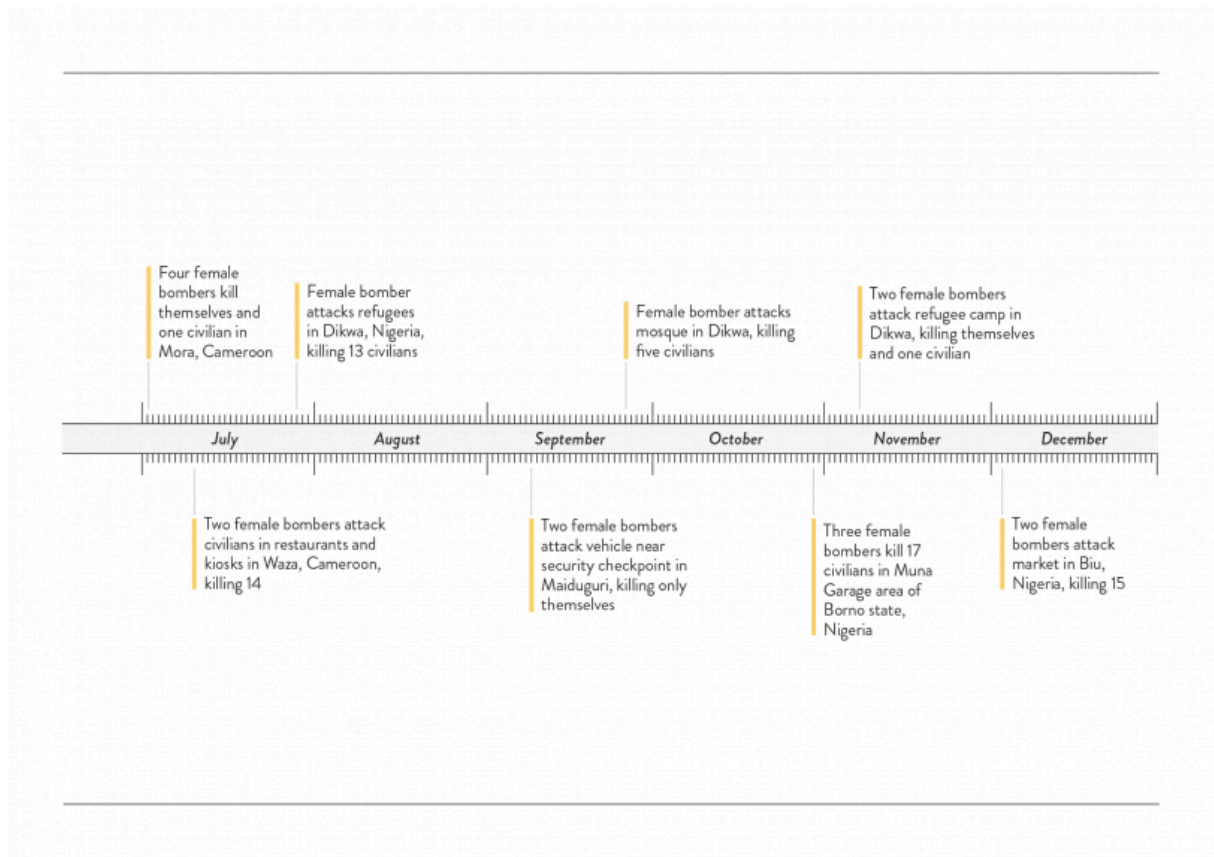
By identifying and exploring individual female assailants, the GEM has exposed the gender distinctions that characterise Boko Haram's violence. The group used women in 49 per cent of its suicide attacks in 2017, deploying 172 female assailants in three countries—Nigeria, Cameroon and Niger—and killing 248 people, including 233 civilians (see figure 4.7). In comparison, 175 male Boko Haram suicide bombers conducted assaults in 2017. By disaggregating seemingly chaotic violence, the GEM has exposed the strategic importance that Boko Haram has placed on female attackers.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Nigeria's Boko Haram Islamists 'bomber Abuja police HQ'", BBC, 17 June 2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13805688>; and "Boko Haram crisis: Nigeria's female bombers strike", BBC, 6 August 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-28657085>.

Figure 4.7: Timeline of Selected Boko Haram Female Suicide Bombers, 2017





Boko Haram's incorporation of women and children into its military campaigns has historically made the group an outlier in Salafi-jihadism. When Boko Haram first deployed suicide bombers in 2011, it used only men. As the group has continued and developed its terrorist campaign in northeastern Nigeria and beyond, it has evolved its violent tactics. In April 2014, the group abducted 276 schoolgirls from Chibok, in northeastern Nigeria.¹² Reports have emerged in recent years of Boko Haram forcing young women and girls to conduct suicide assaults.

Boko Haram has exploited vulnerable local female populations in Nigeria and the Sahel to mitigate security challenges. The group has found that security forces are less likely to kill or arrest female assailants, increasing the probability that a female-instigated terrorist attack will succeed. While the authorities in Nigeria prevented 27 per cent of attempted male-led suicide bombings in 2017, only 21 per cent of female bombers were thwarted.

¹² "Chibok abductions: Nigeria girls 'taken abroad'", BBC, 29 April 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-27206449>.

Boko Haram conducted 86 suicide attacks using only female assailants, deploying 161 women. This accounted for 93 per cent of the female-instigated Boko Haram suicide attacks recorded by the GEM. The group also carried out six attacks involving only male perpetrators, using seven men. Boko Haram deployed more female than male suicide bombers in coordinated simultaneous attacks, exposing the emphasis Boko Haram places on women. In March, four teenage girls conducted a suicide attack close to Maiduguri, in northeastern Nigeria, killing six people. In October, three female suicide bombers attempted to attack a hospital in Molai, on the outskirts of Maiduguri, killing themselves and no others. A fourth female assailant detonated explosives in a nearby village.

Boko Haram used more female than male suicide bombers to target civilians and public spaces. Of the female-led suicide bombings recorded by the GEM in 2017, 82 per cent attacked elements of the public space such as markets and schools. Given the lower arrest rate of female than of male assailants, Boko Haram's use of women in such operations increases the probability of a successful attack and aims to maximise fatalities and damage. Three women conducted a suicide assault on civilians in the Muna Garage area of Maiduguri in October, killing 17 people and wounding 18 others.

The willingness of women and girls to take part in suicide attacks is the subject of much debate. Although women conduct suicide attacks, this does not mean that every woman involved does so by choice. In the case of a successfully detonated suicide belt, it is difficult to assess an individual's level of intent. In interviews, some women and girls who have been intercepted on suicide missions have expressed allegiance and loyalty to Boko Haram, while others say they were coerced, according to reports. Human Rights Watch claims the group is forcing women and girls to carry out suicide assaults against their will.¹³

¹³ "Nigeria: Events of 2017", Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/nigeria>.

THE FULL REPORT

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