

NIGERIA: INVESTIGATING THE EMERGING TREND OF FEMALE SUICIDE BOMBERS IN KANO

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In recent years, Nigeria has been targeted by series of violent attacks, kidnappings and explosions, the most significant culprit of which has been Boko Haram, the radical Islamist group based primarily in the north east of the country. Further intensifying the already severe situation in the country is an emerging trend of suicide attacks being carried out by teenaged girls. While there has been no official claim of responsibility for the attacks, several experts insist that this is the work of Boko Haram. While Nigeria has suffered many suicide attacks in the past, the case of the ancient city of Kano is unique in that it has been plagued with 5 such attacks and one which was successfully prevented within 5 days.

Nigeria's first reported female suicide attack took place on June 8 when a middle-aged woman rode a motorcycle laden with explosives into a military barracks killing one soldier in the city of Gombe, 400km from Kano. Since then, Boko Haram claimed responsibility for another suicide attack in the southern coastal city of Lagos on June 25. The bomber parked her car loaded with explosives next to a fuel depot and detonated the device killing at least 4 other people. Nigerian authorities denied that the blast was a terrorist attack saying that it was an accidental explosion of a fuel tank; however this account triggered serious doubts among the local population. A manager of a major container company quoted by Reuters revealed that the attack was carried out by a female suicide bomber; meanwhile credibility of this information could not be ascertained. While these 2 attacks, particularly the latter, seem to stretch a lot further outside of Kano, they are significant in the foundation of the new dimension of attacks on civilian areas by female suicide bombers in Kano.

ESISC reported the following suicide attacks carried out by teenage girls as well as other incidents that took place in and around Kano between 27-31 July:

- July 27, saw Kano's first female suicide bomber in the Kofar Nasarawa area of Kano, who targeted security officials at the North West Gate. The security officials however noticed the bomber "behaving suspiciously" and kept their distance while attempting to isolate her from her target. The woman detonated her device but no one else was injured in the attack.

- Later that day a bomb was thrown into the premises of Saint Charles Catholic Church in Sabon Gari area of Kano, killing at least 5 people, including a soldier and wounding 8 others.
- On July 28, a female suicide bomber killed 3 people and injured 7 others when she detonated her device at a petrol station in the district of Hotoro in Kano.
- On the same day, 5 police officers were injured when a 15-year-old female suicide bomber detonated her device outside Northwest University in Kano. A police spokesman said that on duty police prevented the woman from entering the university gates and isolated her because she was “behaving strangely.”
- On July 29, an 18-year-old female suicide bomber killed herself and injured 6 others when she targeted the Trade Fair Complex in Kano.
- 2 Shiite mosques were targeted in separate attacks on July 30 where attackers threw Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) into the buildings, killing 6 worshippers and injuring 5 others in the town of Potiskum in Yobe, 300km east of Kano.
- On July 30, 6 people were killed and 6 others were injured as a female suicide bomber blew herself up in a technical college in Kano.
- July 31 saw the arrest of 2 Boko Haram members traveling with a 10-year-old girl strapped with explosives in Katsina state 150km north east of Kano.

Boko Haram leader, Abubakar Shakau has not claimed responsibility for any of the attacks. Experts however have emphasised that while Boko Haram often do make declarations of responsibility, they do not always follow directly after their actions as seen through the claim of responsibility for the abduction of the 276 Chibok girls in April coming at least a month after the incident took place.

In light of the aforementioned attacks which experts suspect Boko Haram is most likely responsible for, we can see a rough trend in the locations targeted in accordance with the group’s ‘legacy.’ Boko Haram, roughly translated to mean, “Western education is forbidden” promotes a version of Islam whereby it is forbidden, for Muslims to partake in any political or social activity associated with western society including voting in elections or receiving secular education. This grants insight into the motives for the attacks on the North West University and Kano’s technical college. Furthermore, the group, which is labeled as a radical Islamist group with the goal of establishing an Islamist state in Nigeria has consequently, targeted Christian churches and Shiite mosques.

The women carrying out these attacks have commonly been noted to have been wearing hijabs – a veil worn by Muslim women in the presence of adult males that covers the head and chest. These females, who were already much less likely to have been suspected of carrying out suicide attacks, concealed the explosives under the long garment which would regularly be worn by most women in the streets of Kano making them an even more discrete and therefore dangerous attacker. Certain security experts, namely Mr Martin Ewi, a researcher with South Africa’s Institute for Security Studies (ISS) considers that the use of female and particularly teenage suicide bombers is the most ‘dramatic’ strategy which leaves targets more vulnerable as no one would have expected any suspicious female suicide attacker.

As a result of these attacks from hijab-wearing females, some Nigerians are calling for a temporary ban of the wearing of the hijab for safety reasons. This suggestion comes following several countries' ban on the use of motorcycles in certain cities which have been the modus operandi for carrying out drive-by shootings and suicide bombings. Countries which have supported such bans include: Lebanon in the capital city of Beirut, Venezuela in the Greater Caracas area, Pakistan in Karachi and Nigeria in Maiduguri where the BBC reports motorcycles represented Boko Haram's trademark attack method on police and politicians. The suggestion of banning the hijab however presents a religious conflict and has been met with massive contention from the Muslim population.

An especially concerning factor regarding these attacks is the possibility that the girls used to carry out the bombings could be from among the 276 Chibok school girls that were abducted by Boko Haram in April. Nigerian media speculates as to the worrying possibility of indoctrination, enslavement and threats these girls could have been subjected to, to force them to carry out these acts of the terrorism. Further reports have suggested 2 potential outcomes from Boko Haram holding these girls captive for the last 4 months. On the one hand, there are fears that girls are coerced into carrying out the attacks out of fear that their families will be harmed if they do not. On the other, as reported by the Los Angeles Times, Boko Haram has released a statement saying that many of the abducted girls have been converted to its violent brand of fundamental Islam thereby raising the fears that the girls could merely be encouraged to carry out these attacks. This has been seen through a video released by Boko Haram on May 12 showing 136 of the 276 predominantly Christian girls who have been converted to Islam. The girls can be seen wearing hijabs and reciting the first part of the Quran. While this was a statement released from Boko Haram, there is no independently verified information confirming the authenticity of the 'conversion' and to what extent the conversion represents as radical a belief as that practiced by Boko Haram.

Eyewitnesses to the Kano attacks including victims and police officials however have reported that some of the female suicide bombers behaved very suspiciously saying that they could, "see the fear in the girls' eyes" as they approached their targets suggesting that some girls may have been coerced into carrying out the attacks. In the case suicide bombings, it is very difficult to identify, isolate and neutralise the attacker. Instead, officials are often oblivious to the bomber and are forced to respond to situations after the attack has already taken place. In light of this, the use of girls and moreover, teenagers, makes the task of identifying potential attackers even more difficult as they are often the least likely suspect if anything is even suspected in the first place. However, police have been successful in isolating 2 of the attackers before the bomb exploded thus claiming no civilian casualties and arresting another 3 people, including the 10-year-old girl strapped with explosives as mentioned in the list above. Police here once again cited the girls as behaving "unnaturally" and "suspiciously" further suggesting that they are not voluntarily carrying out these attacks but were rather coerced to do so.

The Nigerian Vanguard newspaper reported on July 30 that the Federal Government was taking all steps to douse the anxiety that the female suicide attacks in Kano were carried out by the Chibok girls. Coordinator of the National Information Centre, Mike Omeri has also fervently denied any claims or concerns that the girls used in the bombings are the girls held captive by Boko Haram. Furthermore, Nigeria-based security analyst Bawa Abdullahi Wase, says that the female suicide bombers are likely to be the offspring of Boko Haram members who have supported the group for years by providing food, shelter and medicine to the men

but have now been promoted to partaking in the holy war that will send them to heaven. While women do not fit the 7 conditions that make jihad obligatory, namely; being Muslim, being an adult, being sound of mind, being free, being male, being physically sound and being able to afford it financially; Wase does not rule out that they make choose to do so in accordance with Islamic beliefs.

Wase and Ewi have agreed that Boko Haram members, including the female bombers could also have been people from respectable families that have failed to get jobs and whose parents have not received their pensions after 35 years in civil service. The financial strain experienced by these families and the lack of faith in the government has drawn them join Boko Haram. Ewi goes further to emphasise the point that many of their recruits are not only drawn for religious or ideological purposes but rather for money. While information regarding the identities and motives of the female bombers remain unclear for now, inferences could be drawn to a man regarded to be Nigeria's first suicide bomber. Ewi says that a man accepted a payment of approximately €18,500 from Boko Haram to carry out a suicide attack on the police headquarters in Abuja in June 2011 so that his 4 children could have a better life.

Various media outlets however have reported that at least one of the suicide bombers is alleged to be Naomi Adamu, an abducted Chibok girl, after a photo of the bomber released online has since gone viral and has been matched to Adamu's photo in a missing persons report. These photos and the findings however have not yet been independently verified. While there are several theories suggesting that Boko Haram used the Chibok girls or any other kidnapped group to carry out the attack, there has been no statement officially identifying the girls responsible for carrying out the attacks.

On August 7 however, Nigerian media reported a breakthrough in the investigation into the suicide attacks after a Joint Task Force (JTF) raid resulted in the arrest of a man suspected to be the master trainer of Boko Haram female suicide bombers. The man, believed to be Ibrahim Ibrahim, was arrested in Dala Local Government Area of Kano along with the 16 girls who were allegedly being trained to carry out suicide attacks. The suspect is currently being held by the JTF at an undisclosed location and is being interrogated.

The latest series of suicide bombings, perpetrated by teenage girls in Kano demonstrate a new trend in the strategy of Nigerian Islamist terrorists. The BBC's Nigeria analyst Naziru Mikailu says that it does not come as a surprise that Kano has been targeted in this string of attacks as Boko Haram leader and other top commanders were based in the city until a security force offensive ousted them to another hideout somewhere in the Sambisa forest on the border with Cameroon. Rumors and speculations on the fact that the suicide attacks could have been perpetrated by girls kidnapped in Chibok fuel fears that further suicide bombings may take place in the near future.

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