

The Economist explains

Why Boko Haram uses female suicide-bombers

They used to arouse less suspicion, though that may be changing



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BOKO HARAM has used more female suicide-bombers than any other terrorist group in history. Of the 434 bombers the group deployed between April 2011 and June 2017, 244 have been definitely identified as female. More may have been. The Tamil Tigers, the previous holders of the gruesome record, used 44 over a decade, according to a study by Jason Warner and Hilary Matfess for the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, an American military college. Boko Haram, whose insurgency has killed more than 30,000 in north-east Nigeria and neighbouring countries since 2011 and displaced 2.1m, is also the first group to use a majority of female bombers.

Nigeria's government likes to say that Boko Haram has been "technically defeated". It split into two factions last year, after Islamic State (IS) declared a preference for a more moderate leader, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, over Abubakar Shekau. The latter's tactics include using suicide-bombers to blow up mosques and markets, inevitably killing fellow Muslims. (Some analysts dispute the idea of factions, arguing that Boko Haram has always been made up of different cells.) The group is far from vanquished, even though it has been forced out of towns since Muhammadu Buhari, a former military dictator, reclaimed the presidency in 2015. In July the branch affiliated to IS killed 69 members of an oil-exploration team. Indeed the group's suicide-bombings have been especially lethal this year, after a relative lull in 2016. During a period of just over seven weeks from June 1st they killed at least 170 people, according to Reuters, a news agency. The jihadists are sending more children to their death too: the UN has counted 83 used as human bombs this year, four times the total for 2016. Two-thirds of them were girls.

The suicide-bombers sent by Boko Haram are, however, less lethal than those used by other groups, say Mr Warner and Ms Matfess. This is partly because around a fifth detonate their explosives when confronted by soldiers, killing only themselves. Yet still the group sends attackers to Maiduguri, the city where the insurgency began, to target the university, markets and camps for the displaced. It is no coincidence that its use of female bombers rose sharply after the kidnapping of the 276 "Chibok Girls" from their school in April 2014. Boko Haram realised the propaganda value of women: the use of supposed innocents as lethal weapons

has a powerful shock factor. They arouse less suspicion (at least they did when the tactic was first deployed, if no longer) and can more easily hide bombs underneath voluminous *hijab*. And by sending women to blow themselves up, Boko Haram also saves its male fighters for more conventional guerrilla-style attacks.

Some of the women may be willing, if brainwashed, jihadists. Many, though, are believed to be coerced into strapping on bombs. One did so with a baby on her back. Some may see it as a way out of an abusive life as one of Boko Haram's "wives", plenty of whom are raped by their "husbands". Those who give themselves up before detonating their bombs often face a lifetime of stigma, as families and communities prove unwilling to take them back. So whether the women kill anyone or not, Boko Haram sows fear and division, exactly as it intends.

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