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## What Factors Influence the Choice by Radical Islamic Non-State Armed Groups (Boko Haram) to Use Female Child Soldiers in Combat as Suicide Bombers?

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**What Factors Influence the Choice by Radical Islamic Non-State Armed Groups (Boko Haram) to Use Female Child Soldiers in Combat as Suicide Bombers?**

Thesis Submitted to  
The Faculty of Humanities of Leiden University  
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for  
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By

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### **Abstract**

In December 2016 Boko Haram deployed two girls, a six-year-old and an eight-year-old, as suicide bombers (Kriel, 2017; Osasona, 2022). This thesis contributes to our understanding of why this choice, and many others just like it, were made, and seeks to answer the question: What factors influence the choice by radical Islamic non-state armed groups to use female child soldiers in combat as suicide bombers? Existing literature suggests that the only reason terrorist organisations use girl soldiers in combat is ideology (Wood & Thomas, 2017). However, reality indicates that this is not always the case, and thus ideology at best is only a partial explanatory factor. Using process tracing as the research methodology, with Boko Haram as the case study the thesis identifies that the main influential factors as to why rebel organisations choose to use girl soldiers in combat roles, specifically in the role of suicide bombers, are leadership and necessity. Additionally, the research also indicates that in the case of the radical Islamic terrorist group Boko Haram, media attention and convenience play a role in the groups choice to use girl soldiers in combat. By focusing on girls in combat, this thesis seeks to contribute new knowledge that will deepen our understanding of girl soldiers beyond their peripheral supporting roles and contribute to fill the existing gendered knowledge gap on girl soldiers in combat.

“Sometimes people do what they do for the reasons they profess but there are times when what they do is motivated by reasons that are too dark to be openly acknowledged”

(Pieri & Zenn, 2018)

## **What factors influence the choice by radical Islamic non-state armed groups to use female child soldiers in combat as suicide bombers?**

### **Part 1: Introduction**

Boko Haram, a radical Islamic extremist terrorist group from north eastern Nigeria, have used women as suicide bombers since 2011 and have used female children as suicide bombers since 2014. Between 2011 and 2017, the group carried out 434 suicide attacks. Of these attacks 244 were carried out by female perpetrators, however it is suspected that the number is higher, as there were only 338 attacks after which the gender of the perpetrator could be identified (Kriel, 2017). Since 2014, following the kidnap of 217 female students from Chibok, the group have used female children to carry out suicide attacks, some who have been found to be as young as six years old (Falode, 2016; Osasona, 2022). During the same time period, the age of only 134 attacks could be verified, and of those attacks 60% of them were carried out by females younger than 15 years old (Kriel, 2017). This makes Boko Haram not only the first terrorist group in history to be found to use more female suicide bombers than male suicide bombers, but it also makes Boko Haram the forerunner for the use of female child soldiers as suicide bombers (Kriel, 2017; Osasona, 2022). Boko Haram have placed a new face to what the stereotypical demographic of suicide bombers appears to be, and thus this thesis explores the research question; *‘What factors influence the choice by radical Islamic non-state armed groups (Boko Haram) to use female child soldiers in combat as suicide bombers?’*

Boko Haram’s use of female child soldiers, as suicide bombers, echo’s a phenomenon that is occurring globally that remains moderately unexplained. Around the world there are almost 30,000 verified cases of child soldiers used by non-state actors, forty percent of which have been confirmed as girl soldiers (ReliefWeb, 2019; Office of the Secretary-Generals Envoy on Youth, 2015). Under the Paris Principles since 2007 a child soldier is defined as;

*“A child associated with an armed force or armed group refers to any person below the years of 18 years of age who is, or who has been, recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, spies or for sexual purposes.” (UNICEF, 2021).*

Currently, the use of children as soldiers in war is illegal across the world with conventions such as the Paris Principles on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and, United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions 1612 and 1882 prohibiting and monitoring their use (Fox, 2004; Lubis, 2008). However, both state and non-state actors continue to recruit, train and use children as combatants in war and conflict, with 93,000 child soldiers verified between the years 2005 to 2020, although the real number is believed to stand much higher (UNICEF, 2021).

The phenomenon of child soldiers is not a modern occurrence and thus, there is a large body of academic literature that explores the recruitment and use of child soldiers in war and combat. However much of this work examines child soldiers through a perspective that is influenced by gender biases. Within the world of global conflict studies, there exists an active bias that deems war and violence ‘men’s work’ (Haer, 2018). This bias can be found in many aspects of research and reporting, with many of the United Nations reports on child soldiers in combat focusing on the use of boy soldiers, exemplified with reports showcasing young boys holding ammunition (Haer, 2018; McKay, 2005; Devon & Richard-Guay, 2013). Similar reports are written concerning girl soldiers. However, the overall focus is strongly directed towards sexual exploitation or victimhood. It is this one-dimensional view of girl soldiers that has led to a plethora of research that is limited to understanding girl soldiers through their experience of sexual exploitation, forced marriage or as carrying out a peripheral role of cooking or cleaning (Haer, 2018; McKay, 2005; Devon & Richard-Guay, 2013). While such research is crucial to our understanding of girl soldiers, girls have now been shown to have a much more complex role and many have been found to carry out these supporting roles, while additionally also acting in combat. At the same time, others have been found to solely act in a combatant role (Haer & Böhmelt, 2018; Cook, 2005; Fox, 2004). Because of these existing biases, the majority of existing research that focus on girl soldiers, is based around experiences that exclude combat, and thus academia still fails to understand the full experience of girl soldiers who participate both willingly, or by force, in combatant roles such as close quarter combat and as suicide bombers.

Although commonly acknowledged, there has been very little commitment to close the existing knowledge gap and to deepen our understanding of girl child soldiers in combatant roles (Haer, 2018). This gap is a product of several factors including the limited availability of data specifically concerning girl soldiers in combat. For example, there are very few substantial



testimonies of girl soldiers who participated solely in combat. This is perceived to be due to a fear amongst those who survive, that talking out about their experience will further ostracise them from their communities (McKay, 2005).

This thesis aims to contribute to this knowledge gap, by exploring the factors that contributed to the decision by Boko Haram to use girl soldiers in the combatant role of suicide bombers. The thesis will explore possible reasons that may explain why Boko Haram have chosen to use female child soldiers in the combatant role of suicide bombers.

## **Part 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Female Child Soldiers**

The majority of existing work on child soldiers looks at them as a whole (Honwana 2006; Macmillan 2009; Rosen 2009), without separating genders and focusing on their unique experiences. While non-gender specific research is important, it presents a dilemma because the assumption around these works is that boy and girl soldiers have the same experience within armed groups and forces, when this is not the case (McKay and Mazurana 2004). Furthermore, most of the stories portrayed in media and in academia, often have an unstated bias towards focusing on boy soldiers and their experiences causing a widespread neglect of girl soldiers (Denov 2010). The main explanation behind the academic neglect of girl soldiers is deemed to be the existence of a gendered perspective of war and violence which creates a strong presumption that war and violence are ‘men’s work’ (Haer 2018). The traditional image of a soldier is a clear example of how this gender bias exists. The traditional image of a soldier is of a grown man, in uniform, carrying a gun. This is in striking opposition to that of a young girl in tattered clothes carrying a weapon (Denov 2010). The same can be said for the traditional view of suicide bombers, as they are stereotypically portrayed as men. Thus, the traditional and stereotypical image of a soldier conceals the very real realities of women’s and girls’ roles in war and combat. This gender bias plays a large role in maintaining the assumption that girls in armed groups and forces are confined to supporting roles and thus do not take part in active fighting or combat (Haer 2018). However, this assumption is wrong.

Studies have shown that girls are active fighters in conflict in over 38 countries (McKay and Mazurana 2004). Furthermore, it is estimated that globally girl soldiers in armed groups and forces account for between 10-30% of all combatants, and in Africa the percentage of girls as active combatants in conflicts ranges between 30-40% (Denov 2010). Therefore, the assumption that girls are confined to supporting roles in war and conflict is incorrect. While this is slowly being recognized, the academic literature exploring girl soldiers in active fighting roles is still considerably low. Therefore, this thesis will focus entirely on the use of girl soldiers in combatant roles, specifically in the role of suicide bombers. By focusing on girls in combat, this thesis hopes to contribute new knowledge that will deepen our understanding of girl soldiers beyond their peripheral supporting roles and contribute to filling the existing gendered knowledge gap on girl soldiers in combat.

## 2.2 Using Girl Soldiers in Combatant Roles

There are two strategical factors that are believed to make the use of girl soldiers attractive to rebel groups around the world. Firstly, in times of conflict, girls are often left more vulnerable and thus are easier to recruit and have been shown to be more obedient than men, women and boys (Wessells, 2006; Morales, 2011; Rajivan & Senarathne, 2011; Fox, 2004). Commanders from armed groups have stated they prefer to recruit young girls as they are commonly more obedient and malleable than boys or adults, which makes them much easier to train, manipulate or coerce, into carrying out different actions (Morales, 2011; Rajivan & Senarathne, 2011). A large factor that explains girls heightened obedience, is that in the uncertain and abnormal circumstances that arise with war, girls are more threatened and vulnerable than boys and thus they shift their level of obedience as a strategy to minimize avoidable harm (Morales, 2011).

Secondly, armed groups have been found to use girl soldiers due to their ‘element of surprise’ (McKay, 2005). This ‘element of surprise’ is a tactical advantage as it allows girls to travel relatively unnoticed and unsuspected of committing crimes young boys may be stopped for (Wessells, 2006). This characteristic allows them to carry out clandestine roles such as information gathering or suicide bombing (McKay, 2005; Henshaw, 2016; Wood & Thomas, 2017). Additionally, people are less likely to suspect females of being violent and thus having young girls in close combat roles may perplex the enemy and catch them off guard (Haer, 2018; Henshaw, 2016). In Sri Lanka the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have a small group of members called the Black Tigers, all of whom were suicide bombers (Fox, 2004). The Black tigers are believed to have selected younger girls to become suicide bombers as they are more likely to be able to go through security check points without arising suspicions (Fox, 2004; Wessells, 2006).

Whilst this element of surprise has been strongly argued as one of the main benefits of using girl soldiers and women as suicide bombers, (McKay, 2005; Henshaw, 2016; Wood & Thomas, 2017; Fox, 2004) it is slowly becoming outdated as such occurrences are happening more and more (Thomas, 2021). For example, in Nigeria in 2020, a young girl, was beaten to death and then set on fire by locals at a checkpoint as they feared her reluctance to be checked by the security guards, was an indication she was wearing explosives (Hubbard, 2021). However, when the body was later checked, there was no indication of any explosives anywhere on her person, and experts believed she may have simply been intimidated and disorientated when arriving at the check point (Hubbard, 2021). This incident shows that in areas where young

girls have been used as suicide bombers for several years, the 'element of surprise' is no longer as strong as it used to be.

These strategical advantages may indicate why some groups use girl soldiers in combat roles such as suicide bombers. However, if the use of girl soldiers provides a strategical advantage to rebel groups, why is it that not all rebel groups who use child soldiers, use girls in combatant roles?

### **2.3 Understanding Suicide Bombing from Women to Children**

One of the main forms of combat, utilised by rebel organisations and terrorist groups is suicide bombing. It is also the combatant role that many girl soldiers are forced into. The concept of a suicide bomber is an individual (the perpetrator), who operates as a guidance weapon with the ability to approach their target and chose the specific moment in which they detonate a bomb attached to their being. They perpetrator conventionally accepts their death will occur during their attack and sees their death as a sacrifice for a greater cause (Sawicki, 2016).

While the rebel organisation the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam did not invent suicide bombing, they are the organisation that have been credited with the conception of suicide bombing as a tactic of war and a form of combat (Stack-O'Connor, 2007). The Sri Lankan resistance group became the world leader in suicide terrorism between the years of 1980 to 2003 (Sarvananthan, 2018). It was the Tamil Tigers that introduced suicide belts, and the first rebel organisation to have a section devoted to suicide bombers who became known as the Black Tigers (Stack-O'Connor, 2007). This terrorist organisation started employing women into combatant roles including the role of suicide bombers, to the extent that most of the Black tigers are believed to have been female. However, most of the recruitment was done on a voluntary basis and most of the women chose to join the group and willingly volunteered to become suicide bombers (Stack-O'Connor, 2007).

The Tamil Tigers are not the only terrorist organisation to use female suicide bombers. For example, the first recorded female suicide bomber was 17-year-old girl who belonged to the Syrian Socialist National Party, who killed Five Israeli Soldiers in 1985, (Bloom, 2007). One of the other most notorious groups of female suicide bombers is the Black Widows. A group of women from Chechnya who received their name from Russian press after it was discovered most of the women acted to revenge the deaths of their husbands (Speckhard, 2006; Preesman,

2021). There have also been accounts of female suicide bombers acting on behalf of Islamic extremist terrorist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda. For example, in 2008, 39 female suicide operatives deployed by Al-Qaeda were responsible for the killing 363 individuals in Iraq (Bryson, 2017). The main difference, between these women and the female suicide bombers that this thesis will focus on is age. The girl soldiers used by Boko Haram, rarely participate on a voluntary basis because the majority of the girls used as suicide bombers by the terrorist group are under the age of fifteen (Osasona, 2022). For this reason, it is believed that these young girls are deployed by force or through coercion, especially for the girls younger than ten years old (Osasona, 2022).

While it is clear women have participated in suicide bombing since the early 1980's, children used as suicide bombers is a phenomenon that became more apparent in the late 2000's (Sawicki, 2016). When discussing child suicide bombing, it is important to keep in mind the limited accountability that can be placed on children for partaking in these actions. Whilst some female suicide bombers volunteer in order to support a cause they deem important, it is difficult to argue that child suicide bombers freely volunteer as it can be argued that they do not have the same level of understanding of their actions, their beliefs or the consequences, the same way an adult would. (Preesman, 2021).

Child suicide bombers, were first seen being used in Afghanistan in the late 2000s. During this time the Taliban were kidnapping and recruiting boys from religious schools with the purpose of coercing them in to becoming suicide bombers (Sawicki, 2016; Azami, 2014). There are also instances where young girls were also coerced into suicide bombing. For example, in 2011 an eight-year-old girl was killed when she carried explosives in a bag to a checkpoint in Central Uruzgan province. The explosives were detonated remotely resulting in her death (Azami, 2014). Additionally, there are instances in Afghanistan of children who have been arrested either before their explosives have detonated or after a failed detonation. These children have revealed they were told their actions would send them straight to heaven and would relive their suffering while bringing pride to their families (Azami, 2014). It is believed that terrorist groups target children that are born into cycles of poverty and offer them a brighter future (Azami, 2014; McKay, 2005; Morales, 2011). This clearly demonstrates the coercion that pushes these children to participate in such actions.

Therefore, while this thesis focuses on the use of girl soldiers as suicide bombers by Boko Haram, they are not the first terrorist group to do so. However, they are the first such group to do so on such a large scale (Kriel, 2017; Osasona, 2022). While the phenomenon of girl suicide bombers grew exponentially from 2014, there remains a lack of understanding around why only certain groups have chosen to use young girls in the combatant role of suicide bomber and thus while recognising the history of the phenomena, this thesis aims to examine the mechanism that result on the choice to use girl soldiers in the combatant role of suicide bomber.

#### **2.4 Does Ideology play a role?**

The most common answer, found within existing literature, to why some extremist groups use girl soldiers in a combatant role while others don't, is ideology (Wood & Thomas, 2017). A groups ideology is based on their political and social beliefs which influence's their strategies in relation to the recruitment of girl soldiers and determines their ideology on gender concepts around hierarchical divisions of labour. In the simplest terms, it is believed that groups with ideologies based on 'Marxism' are more likely to use girl soldiers in combatant roles, while groups with Islamic ideologies are believed to rarely, if ever, use girls in combatant roles (Wood & Thomas, 2017).

This divide is a product of the ideologies and gender hierarchal beliefs that Marxist and Islamic groups enforce. A fundamental concept and value of Marxism is equality and the elimination of oppression in society which includes the emancipation of women and gender equality (Wright 1993). Therefore, if a non-state armed group influenced by Marxism employs child soldiers, there is a higher chance that they recruit both boy and girl soldiers into combatant ranks.

In contrast, traditional interpretations of Islam, promote traditional gender hierarchies, in which the role of women and girls is to support their male counterparts (Wood & Thomas, 2017). Radical Islamic non-state armed groups have been found to organise their society and their leadership around a strict or fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic law, which re-assert traditional gender norms and relations (Robinson, Crenshaw, & Jenkins, 2006; Wood & Thomas, 2017). For example, while conservative and traditional interpretations of Islamic texts permit women to participate in Jihad, their participation is commonly limited to supporting roles such as wife and caretaker (Cook, 2005; Korotayev, Issaev, & Shishkina, 2015).

Such directions have also been found in radical Islamic manifestos. For example, the ISIS manifesto dictates that the societal expectations for females supporting the group is to fulfil the role of wives and mothers (Wood & Thomas, 2017). The same document also details how any deviation from the dictated traditional gender norms and hierarchies will be seen as a cause for social upheaval in the Muslim world (Wood & Thomas, 2017).

Additionally, within some radical Islamic groups, violent Jihad is seen as a rite of passage and a duty reserved only for men and thus if females of any age were to serve as a combatant it would be seen as an anathema to that group's social hierarchy and norms (Cook, 2005). With such strong beliefs about the role of females in a radical Islamic non-state armed group, the majority of the literature declares strong expectations for women's and girls' roles being limited to supporting roles. Therefore, the claim that females, both women and girls, are used in combatant roles is not something to be expected (Wood & Thomas, 2017).

Consequently, the literature suggests that non-state armed groups that hold a radical or fundamentalist Islamic ideology and recruit child soldiers, are more likely to only recruit boys into combatant roles and recruit girls into supporting roles only (McKay, 2005). Hence, the academic literature paints a strong picture that radical Islamic non-state armed groups don't use girl soldiers in combatant roles as it is against their gender hierarchical beliefs. However, in reality we commonly see non-state actors who claim to follow an Islamic ideology and who have been found to use girl soldiers in combatant roles, specifically as suicide bombers. Girl soldiers have been seen to partake in some form of combat in several large, Islamic non-state armed groups such as Boko Haram, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Taliban (Haer & Böhmelt, 2018). Additionally, it has been heavily speculated that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have also used girls in combat. Therefore, there is a need to ask; why is reality appearing drastically different to what the literature suggests?

## **2.5 Child Soldiers from an Islamic Perspective.**

While Muslims around the world share pillars of religious beliefs, (such as the belief in God, prophets, and the day of judgement,) it is important to acknowledge that not all Muslims follow Islam in the same way (Lubis, 2008). Islamic traditions around the world vary greatly. While well-known terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and ISIS and al-Qaeda claim to follow the Islamic religion, it is important to recognize that their interpretations of Islam differ greatly from most Muslim populations around the world (Schmid, 2015). These groups are commonly

described and labeled as radical Islamic groups in order to separate their interpretations of Islamic laws from traditional interpretations. Therefore, when such groups claim they are waging a war in the name of Jihad, it is crucial we understand how their interpretation of Jihad differs from the conservative and traditional interpretation.

In most (conservative and traditional) interpretations of Islam there are two forms of Jihad; greater Jihad and lesser Jihad. Greater Jihad refers to an “eternal struggle with evil and immoral aspects of self”, and lesser Jihad (also commonly referred to as military Jihad), refers to ‘a struggle by Muslims collectively seeking to defend the region or the community’ (Lubis, 2008, p. 167). Islam is not just a religion and a system of beliefs but it is also a system of jurisprudence in which religious texts are used to create legal norms and obligations in order to shape and govern a way of life (Lubis, 2008). Thus, when talking about military Jihad in these forms it is important to understand that it is not a simple concept, rather it is a cluster of norms and obligations that have been derived from an interpretation of religious texts.

Conversely, for radical Islamic groups Jihad is often interpreted as a call to spread their own interpretation of Islam and is commonly used to justify the use of violence to overthrow or defeat existing governments, (Lubis, 2008; Schmid, 2015). This is the interpretation of Jihad used in this paper, unless stated otherwise. It should be noted that this form of Jihad in many cases faces a dictatorial dilemma as they are ordering the forced removal, through violence, of Muslim rulers. This is only allowed in conservative and traditional Islam under very rare circumstances (Lubis, 2008). In order to navigate this dilemma, and to give legitimacy to their regimes, many radical groups claim that established governments or leaders they seek to violently remove are unbelievers or heretics (Lubis, 2008).

According to most interpretations of Islamic law, children are believed to be divine and thus should be protected and secured by all means (Lubis, 2008). Islam in a conservative and traditional interpretation places obligation on family, on society and on the state, to protect the rights of children and to prevent abuse, violence and exploitation (Lubis, 2008). In line with these beliefs, the seven requirements that individuals must meet to participate in Jihad, are such that children are excluded. The seven requirements are to be, “Muslim, adult, sane, free (not a slave), male, healthy and capable” (Lubis, 2008, p. 175). Thus, the inclusion of adult as a requirement clearly shows children are not, in a conservative or traditional sense, permitted to participate in militant Jihad.



However, it has been noted in conservative and traditional Islam that while children are exempt from military Jihad, under 'dire emergency' children, both male and female, are allowed to participate (Lubis, 2008). In order to justify and legitimise their use of child soldiers, radical groups have been known to announce that their battle against unbelieving leaders constitutes a 'dire emergency' (Rougier, 2012). What is interesting here is that not all such groups use male and female child soldiers in combat as a means to succeed. Some groups choose only to recruit male child soldiers, which aligns with the initial requirement of being male in order to participate in Jihad.

Boko Harams ideology, stems from the Islamic philosophy of Jihadi-Salafism, with the core belief that secular laws lead directly to the eradication of religion, and therefore the current governance of Nigeria is inadequate (Kassim, 2015). Unlike the very early beginnings of the group, the modern-day Boko Haram, show no connection to fighting to solve social issues such as poverty and economic deprivation. Instead, the group is purely fighting Jihad, in order to overthrow the existing political actors and leaders within Nigeria (Kassim, 2015). This is supported by the comments made by Boko Harams former spokesperson, Abu Qaqa, "We do not have any agenda than working to establish an Islamic kingdom like during the time of Prophet Mohammed no matter what will happen to us." (Pieri & Zenn, 2018, p. 646).

### **Part 3: Theory Development; Alternative Explanation**

Ideology proves to be an insufficient explanation as to why specific groups don't use girl soldiers while others do. If conservative and traditional interpretations of Islam allow for children, both male and female alike, to fight in lesser Jihad when the state of 'dire emergency' is declared. If radical Islamic groups believe their fight against unbelievers to be a state of dire emergency, then why don't all such groups choose to use girl soldiers in combat? In order to understand this puzzle a little further, this section will explore possible alternative reasons as to why some radical Islamic non-state armed groups use girl soldiers in combatant role while others don't. Due to the substantial literature that suggests theoretically Islamic groups shouldn't be found to use girl soldiers (Cook, 2005; Haer, *Children and Armed Conflict: Looking at the Future and Learning from the Past*, 2018; Wood & Thomas, 2017), the reality proves to be more nuanced. Hear (2018) has proven that a large group of radical Islamic non-state armed groups do use girl soldiers in combatant roles, however there is still a considerable lack of literature that even attempts to explore under what conditions this phenomenon occurs. Thus, in order to present several possible alternative theories, this section will draw on a combination of literature that explores both the use of women in terror, and literature that explores the use of child soldiers in combat. This combination of literature allows for several alternative explanations.

#### **3.1 Organizational Age (Failing Theory)**

The first possible reason that may affect why certain Islamic groups use girl soldiers in combat is the age of the rebel group (Dalton & Asal, 2011). This theory is originally suggested as an explanatory reason to why some Islamic terror organisations use women in combat. In a study carried out by Dalton and Ansal (2011), it was shown that there is a positive relationship between organisational age and the increased likelihood of women participating in violent attacks. In order to explain this correlation, it is believed that the older such an organisation is, the more likely they are willing to explore alternative modes of violence (Dalton & Asal, 2011). This willingness to explore alternative modes and new strategies of violence arises from the need for the older organisations to adapt to new and changing circumstance within which they must fight their battle. For example, if these older groups have spent years failing to achieve their aims using male combatants, the respective security forces that work to prevent the groups actions are more likely to suspect men and thus will be more vigilant in noticing a male presence. However, the same security forces may not be so well equipped to identify women

and girls as violent actors. Consequently unsuspecting women are believed more likely to go unnoticed (Dalton & Asal, 2011).

This same reasoning is applicable to girl soldiers for several reasons. First, if groups have been using boy soldiers and have been unsuccessful in their time doing so, following the above reasoning, groups may decide to use girl soldiers as an alternative strategy. Girls are believed to be used by groups due to their surprise factor (McKay, 2005) and thus like women they are able to carry out acts of violence without drawing attention. Therefore, it is plausible that the age of an Islamic non-state armed group affects a groups willingness to use girl soldiers.

However, when applying this theory, in reality, the explanatory value fails to fully explain the phenomenon, as groups of varying ages have been found to use girl soldiers. For example, the Taliban, a terrorist organisation that is officially 28 years old, started using girls in combat after 12 years (Haer & Böhmelt, 2018). Conversely, Hezbollah, an organisation that is officially 36 years old, has never been found to use girls in combat (Daher, 2016). Additionally, Boko Haram, which is officially 14 years old, were found using girls only 11 years after they were established (Ekhomu, 2020; Ewa, 2018). Thus, within this small sample the age of such groups has no direct correlation to the use of girl soldiers. While this outcome may differ provided a wider sample, for the purpose of this thesis, organisational age will be considered a failed theory.

### **3.2 Organisational Size (Failing Theory)**

The second alternative reason, which is also derived from the literature on women in terrorism, is organisational size. The initial theory, which was originally used to explain the recruitment of women into terrorist organisations, stems from research around how organisational size affects the organisations' ability to change. It is suggested that medium sized organisations are more able to adapt to change, as they have enough stability and a large enough pool of resources to allow them to cope with possible setbacks, whilst they are also small enough to overcome bureaucratic complications often found in larger organisations (Dalton & Asal, 2011).

This theory is based on varying opinions about how effective larger organisations are at allowing and dealing with the consequences of change. On one hand larger organisations commonly have the luxury of a larger pool of resources such as new technologies, which provides them the opportunity to experiment with their methods as they have the means to cope

with possible setbacks (Haveman, 1993). However, on the other hand, larger organisations are frequently characterised by rigid and extensive bureaucracy, which inhibits change and innovation (Haveman, 1993). This is a key factor that often results in large organisations remaining static over time and less inclined to accept or initiate change.

To apply this to the recruitment of girl soldiers into combatant roles by radical Islamic non-state armed actors, one must look at how these groups function and whether or not they have a strict organisational structure. Dalton and Asal (2011), show that large terrorist organisations, often don't have extensive bureaucracy, rather they have a well-developed division of labour and diverse recruitment practices which allow for innovative changes when beneficial to the organisation (p. 814). Additionally, their research provides concrete evidence that for terrorist organisations, the larger in size they are the more likely they are able and willing to recruit females into their fighting force as a tactic of strategic innovation (Dalton & Asal, 2011). They showed that smaller terror organisations did not have a well enough established division of labour, nor the ability to diversify their recruitment practices, and thus were less likely to extend recruitment to female audiences (Dalton & Asal, 2011).

Much like suggestion of age as an influence, when this theory is applied to real life examples it fails to fully explain the phenomenon. For example, Hezbollah whose fighting force is estimated to be between ten thousand to hundred-thousand soldiers, have never been found to use girl soldiers, whereas Boko Haram whose fighting forces are estimated to be around fifteen-thousand use girl soldiers in combat. While this is a single comparison, it helps demonstrate that this theory fails to explain the use of girl soldiers.

### **3.3 Leadership**

A further alternative reason as to why only certain groups use girl soldiers while others don't, is the role of leadership. Rebel Leaders are believed to act as gatekeepers to the recruitment process (Wood, 2019) and thus are able to decide when and if girl soldiers are used in combat. While the characteristics and capabilities of rebel leaders have been previously dismissed (Doctor, 2021), Haer (2015) argues that the leverage that group leadership commonly holds over structural aspects of their organization is a great indicator of their influence over recruiting girl soldiers into combatant roles. The power of leadership in rebel organisations can be evidenced in their ability to provide a strategic vision, tactical direction and motivation that generates a following (Doctor, 2021). Furthermore, leadership wields power in areas such as

general recruitment and the division in labour, thus the theory that they are the deciding factors on placing girl soldiers into combatant roles makes sense.

There are several factors that influence a leader's style of leadership and the decisions they make regarding the success of their rebel organisation. These factors range from family and childhood experience and education to military experience (Horowitz, Stam, & Ellis, 2015). While this work is grounded in a study on state leaders, Doctor (2021) argues that these factors also influence rebel leaders, as a rebel leaders background works as a "mental rolodex" that can be referenced when engaging in decision making. It is an individual's past and the experiences that they have been through which shapes their identity and provides them with their view of the world. Therefore, when a leader makes decisions, literature suggests that in addition to their beliefs and values, their identity can also be influential. Kramer argues that a leader can sometimes make decisions based on how they believe the decision will affect their perceived identity (Kramer, 2003). He argues that decisions are strongly influenced by the way in which an individual view themselves and how they believe others view them, as they want to affirm their core social identities when possible (Kramer, 2003)

While there have been few studies that examine how a rebel leaders background and identity, effect their leadership style there are even less studies that suggest what characteristics would make a leader more likely to choose to use girl soldiers in combat (Doctor, 2021). This thesis will therefore use a case study will take a deeper look in to Abubakar Shekau, to see what characteristics a leader that choose to use girl soldiers possesses.

***Theory 1:** The Leadership of a group is likely to act as a gate keeper to the choice to use girl soldiers in combat, specifically as suicide bombers.*

### **3.4 Necessity**

All these alternative explanations, while failing to fully explain the phenomenon on their own all hint towards an underlying theme of necessity. The age of an organisation is believed to influence the recruitment of girls because, as a group ages, they face new challenges that need new solutions (Dalton & Asal, 2011). Whilst the background and beliefs of leader's matter, they are more likely to choose to recruit girls in to combat when there is a need for a larger fighting force that can't be filled by men or boys (Wood & Thomas, 2017). These are two instances where it is believed terrorist groups choose to use girls in combatant roles because

they have no alternative. These occurrences may indicate the beginnings of a new pattern within terrorist organisations.

In theory it can be argued that as a group encounters an increase in demand for fighters during conflict, groups turn to all forms of recruitment including young girls. Thus, rather than a matter of choice, the recruitment of girls into combatant roles could be seen as merely 'a need' by some rebel groups. This thesis presents the theory, that in a time of need due to an increase in pressure from opposition, terrorist organisations choose to use girls as suicide bombers out of necessity.

***Theory 2:** In a time of increased pressure from security actors or opposition groups the group are more likely to use girl soldiers due to necessity.*

## **Part 4: Methodology**

This thesis will conduct a single in-depth case study of the radical Islamic non-state armed group Boko Haram. The case study will use process tracing in order to examine to what extent the alternative explanations proposed above answer the research question; *What factors influence the choice by radical Islamic non-state armed groups to use female child soldiers in combat as suicide bombers?* The case study aims to also uncover any other possible factors that may influence the choice to use girl soldiers in combat.

The case study will classify girl soldiers, as any female individual under the age of 18 that has been recruited, either of free will or forced, by Boko Haram. The case study will also classify the act of suicide bombing as an act of combat due to the use of suicide bombing as a tactic of war by terrorist organisations since the 1980s (Sawicki, 2016).

### **4.1 Process Tracing**

This thesis will use theory-testing, process tracing to determine whether a change in leadership is a causal mechanism for the decision to use girl soldiers in combat and to identify what leader characteristics may influence their decision. Process tracing will also be used when assessing how influential the role of necessity is in the choice for Boko Haram to use girl soldiers in combat.

Process tracing is a within-case study method, that is used to understand how causal mechanisms, an unbroken chain of actions or reactions by entities or actors, relates to the hypothesised outcome (Wauters & Beach, 2018).

Boko Haram is an ideal case for conducting process tracing for the mechanism of leadership change, increased necessity and media attention, as all mechanisms can be identified (Wauters & Beach, 2018). However, with process tracing it is important to understand that mechanisms should be seen as sensitive to the specific context in which they occur and thus one mechanism in different contexts may lead to differing outcomes (Wauters & Beach, 2018). Furthermore, it should be noted that casual mechanisms do not claim to be the sole influence that causes the hypothesised outcome, they simply show or disprove there is a link between the mechanism and the outcome (Wauters & Beach, 2018). Therefore, one should be cautious when making generalisations, from a single case study of process tracing.

## 4.2 Observable Implications & Mechanisms

To test the two theories established above, the case study will explore whether or not such theories are seen in the reality of Boko Haram. The case study will identify whether or not the mechanisms underlying each theory are seen in real life and to test how much of the phenomenon of female child soldiers being used as suicide bombers each theory explains.

**Theory 1:** The Leadership of a group is likely to act as a gate keeper to the choice to use girl soldiers in combat, specifically as suicide bombers.

Table 1:

Factor	Observation	Mechanism	Consequences for Theory
Leadership	Change of leadership leads to a change in policy to using girl soldiers as suicide bombers.	With a change in leadership comes a change in gate keeper to how the group operate and how they achieve their goal, leaving room for new decisions to be made.	Support for theory of leadership if present.

In order to recognize whether or not the mechanism takes place the following steps will need to be identified in the given order:

1. Conflict (Internal or external) leading to the dismissal or death of an existing leader,
2. The rise of a new leader, either through force or via internal selection,
3. Identify the new leader has new interpretation of followed ideology,
4. The implementation of policy or the declaration that females, including girl soldiers, are to be used in combat, specifically as suicide bombers,
5. The recruitment, either voluntary or via force, of girl soldiers,
6. Girl soldiers seen in combat (as suicide bombers).

If this chain of events can be identified to have occurred in this order, then it indicates that leadership acts as a gate keeper to the use of girl soldiers in combat.



**Theory 2:** In a time of increased pressure from security actors or opposition groups the group are more likely to use girl soldiers due to necessity.

Table 2:

Factor	Observation	Mechanism	Consequences for Theory
Necessity	Increased pressure from opposition groups or security forces results in use of girl soldiers as suicide bombers.	With increased pressure from local or national security forces, groups face increased pressure and are pushed to find new ways to fight their fight. Thus, using girl soldiers as a new strategy to counter act the increased pressure they are facing.	Support for theory of necessity if present.

In order to recognize whether or not the mechanism takes place the following steps will need to be identified in the given order:

1. A stable standard of operation is established and identified,
2. A change and or increase in pressure being applied by opposition, or other factors including a large loss of resources,
3. Identify a change in behaviour of the insurgent group, either a change in tactics or largescale strategy,
4. The implementation of tactics and policy that includes the initial use of girl soldiers, or an increase in use the use of girl soldiers in combat.

If this chain of events can be identified to have occurred in this order, then it indicates that the group chose to use girl soldiers in combat as part of a new strategy adopted out of necessity.

For both theories, identifying if the given steps occur will help identify whether either factor has an impact on the choice to use girl soldiers in combat, specifically in the role of the suicide bomber.

The case study will also review all found documents that cover any aspect of Boko Haram including; United Nations reports, reports written by NGO such as Save the Children and relevant academic reports or papers. By reviewing all such documents this case study hopes to reveal other factors that potentially contribute to or influence Boko Harams Choice to use girl soldiers in combat.

### **4.3 Case Study Justification**

The literature review indicates that an older terrorist groups of a considerable size, with the original leadership and an encroaching necessity to survive are the characteristics of a radical Islamic non-state armed group that are theoretically most likely to use girl soldiers in combat. However, it is evident that in reality, groups that don't possess all these characteristics still choose to use girl soldiers in combat, specifically in the role of suicide bombers. Boko Haram are a comparatively young organisation, that have a small fighting force and their choice to use girl soldiers coincides with a change in leadership. The above characteristics, according to the established theory, would deem the group unlikely to choose to use girl soldiers in combat. However, Boko Haram have used the most underage female suicide bombers than any other radical Islamic non-state armed group in history (Osasona, 2022; La & Pickett, 2019; Markovic, 2019). This makes Boko Haram an outlying case that contradicts existing literature.

## **Part 5: Case Study**

Boko Haram started using girls as suicide bombers in late 2014, a year in which 85% of all suicide attacks in Nigeria were carried out by females (Turner, 2016). In 2014, Boko Haram carried out 26 suicide attacks (UNSC, 2017). This number increased significantly with the group carrying out 191 suicide attacks between 2015 and 2016 (UNSC, 2017). The majority of the 2015 to 2016 attacks were carried out by females, a large percentage of which were underage (UNSC, 2017). For example, in December 2016 Boko Haram deployed two girls, one who was seven years old and the second was eight years old (Osasona, 2022). In 2017, 101 underage females were deployed on suicide missions, which is over double the number of underaged males deployed in the same year (Save The Children, 2020). While the number of suicide attacks decreased in 2018, the number of underaged females used is estimated at 38 while their male counterparts used is estimated at 10 (Save The Children, 2020). Thus, throughout the years in which Boko Haram have used girl soldiers in combat, they have consistently chosen to use girls rather than boys. However, it remains unclear as to why this choice has repeatedly been made despite the group's radical Islamic beliefs and the existing international laws on underage soldiers. This case study aims to take a deeper look at the mechanisms and underlying factors that may indicate why the group have chosen this path over another.

### **5.1 Boko Haram Background**

Boko Haram is an Islamic non-state armed actor, based in the northeast of Nigeria, that was founded in 1995 (Hentz & Solomon, 2017). In 1995 they were a Sunni Salafist organisation led by Malam Lawan Abuakar, that provided goods to the poor (Ekhomu, 2020). This changed in 2002, after the then leader, Mohammed Yusuf, was introduced and influenced by a radical cleric Mohammed Ali, who taught Yusuf about the beliefs of the Taliban and the strict Wahabism ideology (Ekhomu, 2020). This shifted the group, led by Yusuf, into a strict Taliban inspired group who were anti westernisation and deeply influenced by fundamental and radical Islam (Ewa, 2018). The name Boko Haram came from this transition period, as 'Boko' means western education and 'Haram' means sinful or forbidden (Ekhomu, 2020).

Militant activities by Boko Haram started in 2007 when a small group of Boko Haram fighters killed 13 policemen during a police station attack, which developed in to a gun battle with the Nigerian military that lasted for 24 hours (Ekhomu, 2020). The attack later became known as the Battle of Pan-Shekara. Then in 2008, it is believed that Boko Haram started training their

recruits to use weapons, to understand guerrilla tactics, and to make improvised explosive devices (IEDs) (Ekhomu, 2020).

In 2009 Boko Haram saw its biggest transformation as Yusuf decided to change the mission of the group from Islamic preaching and welfare to Jihad (Hentz & Solomon, 2017). This shift was greatly influenced by Operation Flush in which, a state-run task force shot 17 members of Boko Haram, after the officers stopped a Boko Haram funeral parade as several bikers were not wearing helmets (Ekhomu, 2020). Following the shooting the government, made no inquiry into the mass killing, made no apology and no officers were punished in any way, leading Yusuf convinced that the killings were state ordered (Ekhomu, 2020). Here lay the origins of the Boko Haram that became a more violent and more militant terrorist organisation.

In the following years Boko Haram continued to become increasingly violent, specifically following the execution of Yusuf by the Nigerian Security Forces and the rise of Abubakar Shekau, Yusuf's second in command. Under Shekau's leadership the group expanded operations by increasing the scale of the group's bombings including attacks in neighbouring countries, and by gaining more territorial control (CRS, 2022). In 2014 under the orders of Shekau, the group kidnapped 276 schoolgirls from a school in Chibok, which gained the extremist group its first wave of international attention (Osasona, 2022).

In May 2021 IS-WA, a faction of Boko Haram that split from the main group in 2015 and is backed by ISIS, killed Shekau (CRS, 2022). This has left Boko Haram in disarray, prompting thousands of former Boko Haram fighters and their families to surrender (CRS, 2022; Osasona, 2022). With the demise of Shekau and the chaos now facing his branch of Boko Haram, world authorities are concerned that IS-WA will now pose as the main extremist threat in Nigeria (CRS, 2022). While keeping the recent death of Shekau in mind, this case study will focus on the years of Shekau's rule, as that is the era in which Boko Haram first started using girl soldiers in combat.

## **5.2 Boko Harams Age and Size**

While Boko Haram was founded in 1995, they officially became a militant group in 2007, therefore for the purpose of this research, 2007 will be considered the founding year (Ekhomu, 2020). Therefore, Boko Haram is 14 years old. Additionally, Boko Haram first started using girl soldiers between the year 2010 to 2014 and thus the group was 11 years old when they

commenced their use of girl soldiers (Ewa, 2018). Therefore, Boko Haram is a comparatively young group when compared to other radical Islamic non-state armed groups such as, the Taliban, ISIS and Hezbollah. According to existing literature, older groups are more likely to choose to use girl soldiers as they are more likely to have exhausted other strategies and resources (Dalton & Asal, 2011). However, Boko Haram is a case that doesn't support this theory.

While the official size of Boko Harams troops is unknown, in 2015 it was estimated that they had 15,000 troops. However, the number could be much higher (Amnesty International, 2015). Boko Haram are a smaller organisation compared to similar terrorist organisations. Hezbollah's army has been estimated to be close to 100,000 fighters (Spencer, 2021), ISIS have been estimated to have up to 80,000 fighters (Seldin, 2021), and the Taliban have been estimated to have between 55,000 to 85,000 fighters (AlJazeera, 2021). Similarly, to the age of the group, existing literature suggests that medium to larger organisations are more likely to choose to use girl soldiers (Dalton & Asal, 2011). However, if size of the organisation is measured by the size of the groups fighting force, Boko Haram fails to support this theory.

The following sections of the case study, aim to explore factors that have a higher potential of explaining the use of girl soldiers as suicide bombers by radical Islamic, non-state armed actors.

### **5.3 Boko Haram's Recruitment**

Boko Haram, have been confirmed to have used girl soldiers in combat on multiple occasions, with suicide bombers being the most seen deployment of young girls. The use of child soldiers, both male and female, by Boko Haram was verified by the UN in 2021, in the report of secretary general on children and armed conflict (United Nations , 2021). The report verified the recruitment and use of 15 children in combat, 10 boys and 5 girls (United Nations , 2021). The report also verified the abduction of 68 children who are believed to be being trained for combat, 26 of which were girls (United Nations , 2021). While these cases have been verified, numerous reports of Boko Haram abducting children, (infamously the abduction of over 200 girls from a school in Chibok in 2014,) is a strong indication that the verified numbers only reveal a fraction of the number of child soldiers recruited by Boko Haram (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021; Falode, 2016). This section takes a deeper look at the methods used by Boko Haram to forcefully recruit girl soldiers.

### *Kidnapping*

Boko Haram's main tactic for forced recruitment of young girls has persistently been kidnapping (Osasona, 2022). The most cited example of this, is the infamous kidnapping of over 276 female students in 2014 from a school in Chibok (Save The Children, 2020; Markovic, 2019). The underlying reason for this mass abduction was deemed to be to curtail western schooling that Boko Haram is strongly opposed to (Save The Children, 2020). However less than two months following the 2014 abduction Boko Haram deployed their first underage female suicide bomber, and since then they have continued to do so with females ranging in age, some found to be as young as six years old (Markovic, 2019). While Boko Haram have not stated that the mass kidnapping of 2014, and the kidnappings that followed in later years, (such as the February 2018 abduction of a further 110 female students) took place with the intention of securing a source of female combatants, it is very possibly a partial motivation. (Save The Children, 2020; Osasona, 2022).

### *Family Sacrifice*

While kidnapping appears to be the main source of female recruitment for Boko Haram there have been cases in which families who live within the local community that that Boko Haram operate from, have offered up their young children, most commonly girls as a way to show their support (Osasona, 2022). Studies have shown that the families are motivated to do so to gain economic benefits or to obtain security guarantees (UNSC, 2017). The donated children have been found to be forced to partake in suicide bombings. One example of this is 13-year-old suicide bombers who was detained after she failed to detonate her suicide belt 2014 (Osasona, 2022). She explained to security forces that her father had given her to the insurgent group in order to guarantee the safety of the rest of her family, and then she had been coerced into becoming a suicide bomber (Osasona, 2022).

In the case of forced recruitment, it has been found that most girls are forced or coerced in to becoming suicide bombers (Markovic, 2019). In extreme cases girls have claimed to have been drugged and hypnotised and thus were unaware that they were being deployed as a suicide bomber (Osasona, 2022). For example, in 2017 in an interview with a 14-year-old Boko Haram suicide bomber, whose suicide mission failed, she explained that she had refused to marry, and she heard her kidnappers say that she should be taken to Maiduguri for a suicide mission (Oliphant, 2017). She then goes on to explain that only moments after hearing this conversation

she was held down by three men and injected, after which she couldn't remember anything (Oliphant, 2017).

#### **5.4 Theory 1: Leadership**

##### *Boko Harams Leadership Changes*

The first change in leadership happened in the very early stages of the organisation, before it had become militarised and before it was known as Boko Haram. The organisation can be traced back to 1995, when the group was called "Sahaba" and was led by Abubakar Lawan (Falode, 2016). When Lawan, travelled to Saudi Arabia, he conceded leadership to Mohammed Yusuf, who between the years of 2002 to 2009 gained a large following from the northern regions of Nigeria (Falode, 2016). Yusuf, was given the leadership position because he had a good reputation as a student of Sheik Jafar Mohammed who exposed Yusuf to orthodox Islam (Ewa, 2018). However, after Sheik Mohammed died, Yusuf began to show signs that he leaned more towards radical Islam and retained the radical doctrine of Islamic Jihad (Ewa, 2018).

Under Yusuf, Boko Haram's main aim was to establish a Sharia government for the Borno State. However, after Yusuf died in 2009, Boko Haram became increasingly radical and began to aim for the Islamisation of all of Nigeria (Falode, 2016). The death of Yusuf happened under uncertain circumstances, when he was captured by the Nigerian police force and held in custody where he died of unknown causes (Falode, 2016)

A new era of increased Islamisation and militarisation took place under the new leader Abubakar Shekau (UNSC, 2017). It is under the leadership of Shekau that Boko Haram began using girl soldiers as suicide bombers (Osasona, 2022; BBC, 2021; Okereke, 2014). Under Shekau's leadership, Boko Haram began to carry out carefully coordinated and deadly bombing campaigns within Nigeria. Additionally, during this time period, Boko Haram adopted tactics of unrestricted warfare, which included the use of young girl soldiers some as young as six, who commonly carried out suicide attacks (Falode, 2016; Osasona, 2022). Shekau, was announced dead in 2021 and so far no individual has claimed leadership and several hundred soldiers have surrendered.

##### *Abubakar Shekau*

Shekau was born in 1973 in the Yobe State in Northern Nigeria, and he undertook Islamic Schooling in the Borno State under a local Islamic teach known as Baba Fanani (Okereke,

2014). The local system of education in Northern Nigeria, is called the Almajiri system and is for children between the ages of four to fifteen and focuses in learning the Quran (Okereke, 2014). In 2004 Shekau graduated from the Borno College of Legal and Islamic Studies, where he became known for asserting his own interpretations of Islamic principles (Okereke, 2014). Shekau's past education solely centred around Islamic studies and, his known tendency to interpret Islamic principles in his own way, allows us to better understand his choices to engage in more radical ideology than his former leaders.

Shekau, has been described as a ferocious and fearless individual who quickly rose through the ranks of Boko Haram. He himself declared that he “enjoyed killing anyone that God commands [him] to kill” (Okereke, 2014, p. 20). It could be speculated that Shekau's strong personality allowed him to come to power and re-shape the organisation into his own image regardless of the efforts and intentions previous leaders established. It is well known that during his time as the leader of the organisation Boko Haram became inherently more violent and thus the use of girls in combat and as suicide bombers was among one of many choices made in order for Shekau to achieve his goals.

Shekau wants to be perceived as a strong, unique and individual leader. He has always interpreted Islamic principles in his own way and thus it is likely that he wants to make his own mark on history and to set his own path. The choice to use girl soldiers in combat may be one way that he tried to leave his own mark and to differentiate himself from previous leaders. Additionally, he has consistently shown no consideration for international human rights law, and the use of child soldiers is thus one more way in which he shows his determination. This may indicate that while theory predicts it is more difficult for new leaders of rebel groups to change the path of their organization, if a leader arises with characteristics such as fearlessness and a strong dedication to their own beliefs, they are more likely not to hesitate in making new choices.



**Identification of Process Steps for Theory 1***Table 3:*

Process Step	Reality/Identification	Time Line (Year)
Conflict (Internal or external) leading to the dismissal or death of an existing leader	Mohammed Yusuf (former leader of Boko Haram), Captured by Nigerian Police Force and died/killed in their custody (Falode, 2016)	2009
The rise of a new leader, either through force or via internal selection	Abubakar Shekau (Yusuf's second in command) appeared as the new leader of Boko Haram (UNSC, 2017; BBC, 2021)	2009
Identify the new leader has new interpretation of followed ideology	Shekau showed his differing views on the mission of Boko Haram, through his increased militarisation of the group and a change in tactics to unrestricted warfare (Falode, 2016; Osasona, 2022)	2009-2014
The implementation of policy or the declaration that females, including girl	There is no evidence of an announcement of a change in policy	---

soldiers, are to be used in combat, specifically as suicide bombers	(The implementation of this policy can only be identified from the use of girl soldiers post 2014)	
The recruitment, either voluntary or via force, of girl soldiers	In 2014, the kidnapping of over 276 female students in 2014 from a school in Chibok is the first example of forced recruitment of girl soldiers (Save The Children, 2020; Markovic, 2019). In February 2018 a second abduction of a further 110 female students occurred (Osasona, 2022)	2014 - 2018
Girl soldiers seen in combat (as suicide bombers)	The first underage female suicide bomber was deployed by Boko Haram two months after the 2014 Chibok kidnapping. (Markovic, 2019)	2014

### 5.5 Theory 2: Necessity

2014 was a year in which many actions happened within the sphere of counter terrorism that impacted Boko Haram. In June 2014, Abubakar Mohammed Shekau, was added to the UNSC's Al Qaeda Sanctions Committee's list of individuals that can be targeted for financial sanctions under UNSC Resolution 2161 (Okereke, 2014). In the same year, at different points of time, the Nigerian Security forces and an indigenous hunters' group, both claimed to have killed Shekau (Okereke, 2014). However, towards the end of year, Shekau reappeared on a YouTube

video to prove he was still alive, and that he remained the leader of Boko Haram (Pieri & Zenn, 2018).

It was during this year of increased pressure on Shekau, that Boko Haram first deployed underage girls as suicide bombers (Markovic, 2019). In the latter half of 2014 Boko Haram deployed a total of 26 girl soldiers as suicide bomber (UNSC, 2017).

During the following year between 2015 to 2016, Boko Haram faced increased counter terrorism measures, from multiple outlets. Firstly in 2015 President Muhammadu Buhari was elected based on his promises to increase counter terrorism activities against Boko Haram (Center for Preventive Action , 2022). This led to increased effort by the Nigerian Military, with the help of neighbouring regions such as Cameroon, Chad and Niger, to push Boko Haram out of captured territories. (Center for Preventive Action , 2022)

This increased opposition against Boko Haram, was met with a radical increase in the number of suicide bombers deployed, who again were mainly young females. Between the years of 2015 to 2016, Boko Haram drastically increased the number of female suicide bombers they deployed, with a total of 191 attacks in a space of 12 months (UNSC, 2017). This increase in suicide bombers marks a change in Boko Haram's tactical strategy. Prior to 2015, the groups had largely focused on tactics such as surprise ambushes, targeted killings, drive-by shooting and coordinated assaults of towns and villages simultaneously (Okereke, 2014). While suicide bombings had also been part of their tactics, suicide bombings prior to 2014, had been carried out by men or boys, and were done so less regularly (Okereke, 2014). In 2015, the group marked its climax of territorial control and thus it is feasible that once the group faced increased pressure by the Nigerian Military and neighbouring countries, the group changed tactics from gaining territorial control to keeping territorial control, and when that proved to be too much of a challenge, the group started using girl soldiers in volume attacks as suicide bombers in order to create mass chaos and to distract and re-direct the Nigerian militaries focus (Pieri & Zenn, 2018). Therefore, it is possible to argue that Boko Haram's choice to consistently use girl soldiers in combat, may have been motivated by necessity due to the changing pressures upon them. It could be argued that Boko Haram, chose girl soldiers to carry out suicide attacks, as they saw them as a disposable resource in a time of need.

In support of this argument, it has been shown that Boko Haram have used women and girls because of the strategic benefits they provide. Boko Haram have acknowledged that females are able to easily conceal explosive belts under their billowy clothing and conventionally seen as less of a threat giving them easier access to more public areas without looking suspicious to local security (Warner & Matfess, 2017). Additionally, the group have claimed to use women and children in order to spread more fear with in communities. Accordingly, in a time when the insurgent group feels pressured by the Nigerian Military, using young females as suicide bombers can be seen as a strategic choice motivated by necessity.

### Identification of Process Steps for Theory 2

Table 4:

Process Step	Reality/Identification	Time Line (Year)
A stable standard of operation is established and identified	The groups had largely focused on tactics such as surprise ambushes, targeted killings, drive-by shooting and coordinated assaults of towns and villages simultaneously (Okereke, 2014)	2011-2013
A change and or increase in pressure being applied by opposition, or other factors including a large loss of resources	Shekau, targeted for financial sanctions under UNSC Resolution 2161 (Okereke, 2014) Claims of Shekau's Death (Okereke, 2014) Election of President Muhammadu Buhari & the increase of counter terrorist activities from Nigerian Military	2014-2015

	supported by Neighbouring countries (Center for Preventive Action , 2022)	
Identify a change in behaviour of the insurgent group, either a change in tactics or largescale strategy	An increase in the amount of suicide bombings, specifically a large increase in the use of girl suicide bombers. (UNSC, 2017) (Potentially used as part of a bigger plan to try and keep territory and distract Nigerian Military (Pieri & Zenn, 2018))	2015-2016
The implementation of tactics and policy that includes the initial use of girl soldiers, or an increase in the use of girl soldiers in combat	An increase in the deployment of girl soldiers was seen between 2015 to 2016; 191 suicide attacks in 12 months (UNSC, 2017)	2015-2016

## 5.6 Additional Findings

### *Media attention*

Existing research indicates that Boko Haram's use of young girls as suicide bombers is also motivated by a want to generate publicity and attention. Boko Haram have been shown to use volume attacks in order to generate more media attention and it is speculated that the insurgent group have started to focus on the disruptive potential of attacks instead of the lethality (Osasona, 2022). Boko Haram's fatality rate as a result of suicide bombing between the years of 2012 to 2018 is 21.5%, which is in the lower percentile compared to other insurgent groups

using suicide bombing (Osasona, 2022). For example, in 2017, the average death toll per incident totalled at two fatalities. Eighty-one of the groups suicide missions were unsuccessful due to either a dud detonator, an early detonation or the suicide bomber being arrested by security forces prior to the attack (Tony Blair Institute For Global Change, 2018). By focusing on disruptiveness, they intend to spread a psychological message of fear and power by disrupting the lives of citizens in open and public places previously deemed safe. This same message of fear can be intensified by using young girls as suicide bombers. Female suicide bombers have a greater psychological impact on public audiences due to gender biases that commonly deem women less threatening than men (Turner, 2016). Thus, when young girls, who were in general previously seen as harmless, are then seen capable of being suicide bombers, it spreads a level of uncomfortable suspicion and unease with in the general population. Additionally, when the age of the suicide bomber is below 10 years old it adds additional fear to this phenomenon and furthers the psychological impact. It is therefore very plausible that when Boko Haram started using young girls as suicide bombers, this was part of a strategic plan to gain more media attention, through increased shock factor and psychological fear.

#### *Source of Funding & Convenience*

Under the leadership of Shekau, Boko Haram expanded their funding resource income sources. Shekau made the choice to increase their funds through kidnap ransoms, and extortion often in the form of protection fees (Okereke, 2014). Since 2014 Boko Haram have consistently kidnapped young girls, and while some ransoms are paid others are not, this feeds Boko Haram with a large source of females. While it is most common that these girls are married to militants of the insurgent group and exploited for sexual purpose, it has been shown that those who refuse, have been used as suicide bombers (Osasona, 2022). Therefore, it is possible to deduce that this new form of funding, has placed Boko Haram in a situation in which it is convenient to use girls in combat. With increasing pressure from Nigerian security forces and a decrease in fighting forces due to mass surrendering's, using the girls they hold hostage to further their cause may present itself as a convenient and viable option.

## **Part Six: Discussion**

### **6.1 Exploration of Leadership as Motivating Factors for Boko Haram's use of Girl Suicide Bombers**

The theory that leadership of a terrorist group acts as a gate keeper to the choice of using girl soldiers in combat, is supported by the Boko Haram case study. The case study shows that all the theoretical process steps identified within the methodology could be identified in reality. The process of leadership changes clearly coincided with the choice to use girl soldiers as suicide bombers. Firstly, Shekau, became leader of Boko Haram following the death of Yusuf in 2009 (Falode, 2016). Thus was an unattested rise to power as Shekau had been Yusuf's, second in command (BBC, 2021). From the very beginning Shekau, began to share his views on the mission of Boko Haram, through a quick militarisation of the group and change from more passive tactics of war to tactics of unrestricted warfare (Falode, 2016; Osasona, 2022). While there is no evidence of any statements made by Shekau or Boko Haram in general concerning the change in policy to the use of girl soldiers, the regular occurrence of girl suicide bombers following the kidnapping of 276 female students in 2014 clearly marks the beginning of Boko Haram's new strategy (Markovic, 2019). This natural progression that occurred under the rule of Shekau, demonstrates how influential he was in the decision to use girl soldiers as suicide bombers. This finding shows potential for the theory of leadership to have explanatory value when trying to understand the use of girl soldiers in combat. While this is a single case study, and therefore the results cannot be generalised, it is a positive step towards further understanding the role of leadership in the phenomenon of girl soldiers especially girl suicide bombers.

### **6.2 Exploration of Necessity as Motivating Factors for Boko Haram's use of Girl Suicide Bombers**

The case study reveals support for the role of necessity in the choice to use girl soldiers as suicide bombers. Theory of necessity, suggests that a terrorist group, will choose to use girl soldiers in combat, specifically as suicide bombers, during times in which the group is facing increased pressure from opposition groups or security forces.

The case study outlines a time line between 2014 and 2016, in which Boko Haram started facing increased pressure from the Nigerian Military and security forces, who were assisted by the militaries of neighbouring counties (Okereke, 2014). During the same time Shekau was targeted for financial sanctions by the UN (Okereke, 2014), and a new president who was

committed to fighting Boko Haram was elected (Center for Preventive Action , 2022). It was amongst all this opposition pressure that the group started using girl soldiers as suicide bombers. Therefore, there is a clear correlation between increase pressure and the use of girl soldiers, showing that girl suicide bombers may have been used due to necessity.

### **6.3 Exploration of Media Attention as a Contributing Factor to the Use of Girl soldiers as Suicide Bombers.**

The case study suggests that the want for media attention has played a role in Boko Haram's choice to consistently use girl soldiers as suicide bombers. When Boko Haram started using girl soldiers as suicide bombers, the phenomenon of child suicide bombers was relatively unseen (Sawicki, 2016). At the same time while the world had slowly become more aware of female suicide bombers when such attacks are reported there still existed a large sense of unease and shock. Thus, when female suicide bombers used by Boko Haram were shown to be underage, some as young as six, the psychological fear and shock of such an attack is strongly exacerbated (Falode, 2016). However, upon further inspection, there is more to Boko Haram's want for media attention. While the groups use of volume attacks, their focus on disruptiveness and their use of girl soldiers for shock factors, all create a higher chance of global news coverage, and attract social media attention, it is their own presence on social media platforms that really highlight the groups want for public attention (Berents, 2016; BBC, 2021; Osasona, 2022).

In 2014, following the kidnapping of school girls from a school in Chibok, families of the kidnapped took to social media particularly twitter, to demand action to be taken by the Nigerian government (Berents, 2016; BBC, 2021). The movement lead to the trending hashtag "Bring-BackOurGirls" that was being retweeted firstly with Nigeria, and then globally. The movement started to catch the attention of celebrities around the world including celebrity activist, Angelina Jolie, and Michelle Obama who has been a vocal advocate for female education around the world (Berents, 2016). This is a clear of example of an action taken by Boko Haram that gained strong international attention through social media.

In addition to media attention created through a focus on shocking crimes committed by Boko Haram the group has also actively been engaged with social media platforms. For example, in 2014, Shekau used YouTube in order to disprove claims that he had been killed by the Nigerian Military (Okereke, 2014). Since then, the group have used YouTube as a way of mobilising



and radicalising fighters and as platform for Shekau to share his opinions, beliefs and differing interpretations of Islamic laws (Okereke, 2014; Oliphant, 2017; Pieri & Zenn, 2018). For example, it was on YouTube that Shekau shared his thoughts on how the group intended on using the girls that had been kidnapped from a school in Chibok. Shekau announced “I abducted your girls; I will sell them in the market, by Allah. I will sell them off and marry them off” (Okereke, 2014, p. 20). In addition to YouTube, in 2015, Boko Haram launched an ‘official’ Twitter account (Pieri & Zenn, 2018). The account shared audio of Shekau’s preaching’s, as was strongly promoted by the Islamic State (Pieri & Zenn, 2018). This clearly demonstrates an attempt to use social media platform in order to gain more attention to their cause.

The combination of Boko Haram’s own efforts of engaging on social media platforms and the run off attention gained through shock factor, demonstrates how media, both conventional and modern, has been a core part of Boko Haram’s efforts for attention. Therefore, the groups use of girl soldier in volume attacks around Nigeria, should be closer analysed in order to determine how effective these attacks were in creating media attention.

#### **6.4 Exploration of the Convivence of Using Girl Soldiers**

The case study highlighted that Boko Haram started kidnapping young girls as a way to expand their source of income and to acquire females to be married to militants from the group. However, since 2014, it has become evident that many of the girls who were kidnapped have also been used as suicide bombers (Osasona, 2022). It is plausible that Boko Haram has used these girls as suicide bombers, because they are seen as disposable and a convenient source of manpower during times of difficulty.

There is a theory, that girl soldiers are recruited to be used by terrorist groups and rebel groups during war, because they are more vulnerable and easier to conscript by force (Fox, 2004; Morales, 2011). During war, girls experience increased vulnerability because damaged societies and families are unable to provide them the usual or needed amount of protection (Morales, 2011). In the case of Boko Haram, the case study shows that girls in Nigeria have commonly been kidnapped in larger groups, but they have also been ‘gifted’ to the group as a way for families to show their allegiance to Boko Haram and as a way to gain extra security (Osasona, 2022; UNICEF, 2021). Therefore, in the face of increase threats and a decreasing

fighting force, Boko Haram have created efficient avenues through which they can recruit girl soldiers.

Reaching out to a new demographic in order to expand a fighting force is not an unheard tactic, for example the Tamil Tigers admitted they only started using women in combat, when they realised that they had a shortage of capable men (Stack-O'Connor, 2007). Women in this scenario became convenient to use. It should be noted that this differs slightly as the women recruited by the Tamil Tigers mainly volunteered to be soldiers, and in the case of the Black Tigers they volunteered to be suicide bombers (Stack-O'Connor, 2007).

Boko Haram, therefore, may have consistently chosen to use girl soldiers, simply due to convenience. Girls for them, became a convenient supply of man power that were deemed disposable, easy to manipulate and capable of being placed in very public places without arising suspicion.

## **Part 7: Conclusion**

This thesis set out with the intention of answering the question, ‘what factors influence the choice by radical Islamic non-state armed groups to use girl soldiers in combat as suicide bombers?’ It identified two possible factors, leadership and necessity, in existing literature on the use of child soldiers, and women in terrorism. In order to test the existence of these factors and to test their explanatory value in real life the thesis carried out a case study on Boko Haram. While this case study identified both leadership and necessity as explanatory factors, the case study also revealed two new factors that may influence Boko Haram’s choice to use girl soldiers as suicide bombers, media attention and convenience.

*Thus, there are four factors that appear to influence Boko Harams choice to use girl soldiers in the combatant role of suicide bomber: leadership, necessity, a want for media attention, convenience.*

Firstly, the case study clearly demonstrates the role of leadership in the choice to use girl soldiers as suicide bombers and highlights that those leaders who are outspoken about their differing interpretations of their group’s ideology, who show a constant disregard for human rights law, and who aim to present themselves as fearless and brave, are likely to choose to use girl soldiers in combat.

Secondly the case study shows how influential necessity can be in the decision making of a terrorist organisation. By demonstrating, how in a time of increased pressure from opposition, terrorist groups may choose to use girl soldiers out of necessity to maintain their fight or as a tactic of distraction.

Thirdly, the case study indicates that Boko Haram may have chosen to use girls as suicide bombers, due to shock factor and the way in which such attacks have the ability to spread higher levels of psychological fear within a population. Therefore, such attacks, are more likely to gain increased media attention, both through traditional media such as news broadcasts or through social media platforms such as twitter and YouTube.

Lastly, the cases study showed how due to Boko Haram’s decision to diversify funding avenues through ransom, the group had a large supply of young girls. Thus, it could be speculated that young girls became a convenient supply of manpower that were deemed disposable.

While young girls, may provide terrorist groups with a strategical advantage, the case study shows what factors may lead some groups to choose to use girl soldiers while others don't. For example, the case study shows that a more outspoken leader who has differing or flexible interpretations of the group's ideology may be more likely to choose to use girl soldiers. Where a quiet, deliberative leader may choose not to. Additionally, groups who are not facing extreme pressure from opposition groups or national security forces, may not feel the need for a new demographic of manpower.

While these four factors, clearly influence Boko Haram's choice to use girl soldiers as suicide bombers, it is not possible to argue that there are no other influencing factors, nor is it possible to determine one factor more influential than the other. In the case of Boko Haram, it appears that the four factors, leadership, necessity, a need for media attention and convenience all contributed to the group's choice.

Future research should conduct different case studies of other terrorist organisations, in order to test which of these four factors is the most recurrent. Future cases studies may also help identify other influential factors that may not have been pertinent for Boko Haram. Additionally, future research should consider comparing personality traits of leaders from terrorist organisations that choose to use girl soldiers in combat and conduct a comparison to leaders who chose not to use girl soldiers in combat. This may for allow predictions of which groups are more likely to choose to use girl soldiers, and then humanitarian organisations and national governments in theory could provide aid in areas which children specifically young girls may be more susceptible to recruitment by terrorist organisations.

Future Research should further explore all four factors outlined in this thesis. Gaining a deeper understanding of these factors would allow for more productive policy making, and would aid in the strategical thinking around preventing the use of female child soldiers in combat. While necessity and convenience are clear drivers in the choice to use girl soldiers in combat, they are difficult factors to control during a time of conflict or war. However, being able to identify these turning points in such conflicts may help predict when female child soldiers are a potential threat and act accordingly.

In conclusion, the main factors that contribute to radical Islamic non-state armed groups choosing to use girl soldiers in the combat, specifically in the role of suicide bomber, are leadership, necessity, media attention, and convenience.

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