Non-State Armed Groups and Attacks on Education: Exploring Trends and Practices to Curb Violations

A lecture theater at the Federal College of Education, Kano, Kano state, Nigeria, destroyed when Boko Haram insurgents lobbed grenades and shot students taking classes on September 17, 2014. At least 27 students and two lecturers were killed in the attack.

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September 2023

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Summary and key findings

Each year, non-state armed groups carry out attacks on schools and universities, and their students and staff, in conflicts around the world. This scoping paper provides background on the topic and explores global trends in non-state armed group attacks on education. The motivations and factors associated with these groups attacking, or in some cases safeguarding, education are considered. This paper also highlights various practices and policies, from the community to international levels, to curb non-state armed group attacks on education and use of schools and universities for non-educational purposes. The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack relied on analyses of its Education under Attack database, an extensive literature review, and interviews with international organization staff and experts on non-state armed groups for this paper.

Curbing attacks is possible. Certain practices, measures, and interventions have the potential to limit non-state armed group attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure generally or attacks on education in particular.

Key findings:

- In 2020 and 2021, non-state armed groups perpetrated a slight majority of reported attacks on education, but a minority of reported military use, compared to state forces and incidents without identifiable perpetrators.[1]

- The level of organizational and operational capacity of a non-state armed group and other key characteristics may influence whether they carry out attacks on education, what types of attacks they perpetrate, and which weapons they use. For instance, non-state armed groups with a loose grip on rank-and-file members may use indiscriminate gunfire near schools, while those opposed to "Western" education or girls' learning often abduct students or target schools with improvised explosive devices. Taking into account the characteristics of non-state armed groups, and their established trends and patterns, may support civil society, international organizations, and governments to more effectively identify and disseminate practices to limit attacks.

- Curbing attacks is possible. Certain practices, measures, and interventions have the potential to limit non-state armed group attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure generally or attacks on education in particular. Non-state armed groups generate some of these practices internally, while other interventions and measures come from communities, governments, and local or international non-governmental organizations.

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1   To reach these findings, GCPEA drew on its Education under Attack database, which compiles reports of attacks on education and military use from the United Nations, non-governmental organizations, media outlets, and in-country sources.

Key recommendations

Non-state armed groups should:

- Protect the civilian character of schools and universities and cease attacks and threats of attacks against students, teachers, academics, and educational facilities.

- Refrain from using schools and universities for military purposes, including by using the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict* and incorporating them, as relevant, into their doctrine, manuals, orders, and trainings to encourage appropriate practice throughout the chain of command.

Civil society, international organizations, and donors should:

- Incorporate the *Guidelines*, as well as the protections afforded students and teachers and schools and universities, among other civilians and civilian objects, under international humanitarian law, into trainings and materials when engaging with armed groups, in contexts experiencing attacks on education.

- Document and share measures taken by communities, armed groups, governments, or international organizations to prevent or mitigate attacks on education by armed groups.

An 11-year-old girl who had been out of school for three years because Seleka fighters are based near her school in the Central African Republic. ***"I liked being in school, it made me feel good to put on my uniform and go to class," she said. "I liked literature because it was the subject I was best at. I want to be a teacher, but now I have to work in the field."***

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I. Background

While secondary students and their families collected diplomas, Al-Shabab detonated twin car bombs near the Ministry of Education, in Mogadishu, Somalia. The attack, on October 29, 2022, killed at least 121 civilians and wounded hundreds more, according to news reports.[i] Al-Shabab claimed responsibility and reportedly targeted the Ministry because the non-state armed group opposed the government's education curriculum.[ii] "As young Somali people, especially university students, these blasts hurt us a lot, therefore, the universities and schools were closed so that the students [were] able to take part in blood donations and other rescue efforts for the victims," one university student told an international news outlet.[iii]

The Al-Shabab attack is one example of many. Non-state armed groups[2] are responsible for a significant proportion of attacks on education globally. These attacks kill, injure, and cause damage to schools and universities. They also produce fear and keep students from receiving an education, which stunts community and economic development.

The following pages explore the relationship between non-state armed groups and attacks on education. First, an overview of non-state armed groups is presented, including a typology of these groups and discussion of factors that may contribute to their attacks against civilians. Next, an analysis of the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack's (GCPEA's) Education under Attack database reveals the proportion of attacks on education and military use of schools perpetrated by armed groups in 2020 and 2021, as well as the specific subtypes of attacks on education they commonly perpetrate. Then, characteristics of armed groups and practices which may curb their attacks on education and military use of schools are examined. Recommendations to better protect education during armed conflict conclude this paper.

This is a scoping study. It is meant to spark and inform future research and projects to deter armed groups from attacking education. This paper builds on past GCPEA work; for instance, the Coalition's report _The Role of Communities in Protecting Education from Attack: Lessons Learned_ documents and disseminates cases of communities negotiating with non-state armed groups to protect access to education.

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2   This paper uses the terms "non-state armed group" and "armed group" interchangeably.

II. Methodology

To research and write this scoping paper, GCPEA researchers carried out a desk review of the relevant policy and academic literatures and interviewed ten non-governmental and UN field and headquarters staff and experts on non-state armed groups. Much of the academic and policy literatures considered here are social science research on non-state armed groups. At its core, this research asks when and where armed groups use violence with the intention of determining the conditions under which these groups are likely to use restraint, rather than violence, towards civilians. This is distinct from an international humanitarian law analysis of armed group attacks on civilians.[3]

A limitation of the research is that GCPEA did not interview local communities or local non-governmental organizations, so home-grown promising practices may be underrepresented in the section on potential ways forward while international practices may be overrepresented.

GCPEA researchers relied on the Education under Attack (EuA) database for several analyses. GCPEA uses the EuA database to compile verified and unverified incidents, tallies, and qualitative information on attacks on education and military use globally from news, non-governmental organization, human rights, and UN reports, as well as confidential sources; it serves as the basis for the *Education under Attack* reports, case studies, and other research. GCPEA researchers used the database to count the number of countries with incidents of armed group-perpetrated attacks or military use in 2020 and 2021. The same database was used to calculate the fractions of reported attacks and military use perpetrated by non-state armed groups, as compared to state forces and unidentified reports, during those same years. For the percentages related to attacks on education, the calculation relied primarily on incident reports and excluded tallies of attacks, since these typically did not disaggregate by the perpetrators. For the military use percentages, the calculation used both incidents and tallies, since in that case tallies generally reported the perpetrators. In both cases, the percentages reported here relied on incidents of attacks on education and military use which GCPEA was able to identify and collect; as such, these percentages are not a representation of all education-related attacks and occupations that occurred in 2020 and 2021.

For this paper, non-state armed groups are classified as sufficiently organized groups that use violence, generally control territory, often seek political, social, or economic objectives, and are not under effective control of state forces. Armed forces include state military forces, law enforcement, and other state security entities, including state intelligence. Multinational and peacekeeping forces are grouped as state forces. For definitions of perpetrators, attacks on education, and military use, as well as additional details on data collection and analysis, see the methodology section of *Education under Attack 2022* and the codebook in the *Toolkit for Collecting and Analyzing Data on Attacks on Education*. Several analyses in this scoping paper draw on calculations available in the *Toolkit*.

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3   Rather than the language of "attacks" or "indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure," common in international humanitarian law analyses, this scoping paper occasionally uses "violence," "targeted violence," and "indiscriminate violence" as catch-all terms. Their use is not meant to suggest that a particular incident violates international humanitarian law or otherwise make legal determinations.

III. Introduction to the relationship between armed groups and attacks on education

Non-state armed groups

In recent years, thousands of non-state armed groups have operated across more than 70 armed conflicts globally.[iv] The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) identified more than 520 armed groups "of humanitarian concern," in 2022, and estimates that at least 175 million people live in areas fully or fluidly controlled by armed groups.[v] The majority of armed groups operate in Africa and the Middle East, while others are located in South America, Asia, and beyond.[vi] These actors impact the lives of civilians in a number of ways. In some instances, armed groups attack civilians and civilian infrastructure, including schools and universities, and their students and staff; in others, they facilitate or even provide basic services, including law enforcement, health, and education. However, most armed groups are located somewhere towards the middle of the spectrum, both perpetrating some violence against civilians while also facilitating or providing them with some welfare.

In the simplest terms, non-state armed groups are actors that operate outside state control and use armed violence to achieve their objectives.[vii] Armed groups, in more depth, have some degree of organizational capacity, pursue political, ideological, or economic aims, and are capable of engaging a state or other armed group in armed violence.[viii] Given their number and geographic scope, these groups vary considerably. Some enjoy control over swaths of territory, while others are mobile; some have civil structures which provide goods and services or collect taxes, while others do not provide for nearby populations; some are hierarchical, others are decentralized; some use newer technology such as drones, while others rely on small arms and improvised explosive devices; some are urban, while others operate primarily in rural theaters or even across international borders; some receive arms, protection, and support from states other than the one they fight, while others tax populations or extract resources domestically.[ix] Members of armed groups may join voluntarily or they may be forcibly recruited, among them children.[x] Sometimes referred to as "rebel groups," "armed opposition groups," or "*de facto* authorities," some well-known examples of armed groups include the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (FARC-EP), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines, Boko Haram and affiliated or splinter groups in the Sahel, the Taliban in Afghanistan before August 2021, and al-Qaeda in the Middle East, Africa, and other regions.[xi]

International humanitarian law (IHL) is relevant for defining non-state armed groups as parties to non-international armed conflicts. Under international humanitarian law, an armed group becomes party to an armed conflict if it shows a certain degree of organization and is involved in hostilities of a certain degree of intensity.[xii] Based on jurisprudence from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, the following list of characteristics for identifying a sufficiently organized group can be summarized as: "…i) the existence of a command structure; ii) the military (operational) capacity of the armed group; iii) its logistical capacity; iv) the existence of an internal disciplinary system and the ability to implement IHL; and v) its ability to

speak with one voice."[xiii] This list of attributes is not meant to be definitive or exhaustive.[xiv] Meanwhile, Additional Protocol II to the 1949 Geneva Conventions, which applies to some non-international armed conflicts, defines these groups as "...dissident armed forces or other organized armed groups which, under responsible command, exercise such control over a part of its territory as to enable them to carry out sustained and concerted military operations and to implement this Protocol."[xv] According to the ICRC, more than 100 non-state armed groups can be considered parties to a non-international armed conflict and are, thus, bound by international humanitarian law.[xvi]

Non-state armed groups and attacks on education

Although they may also provide or facilitate learning and other services, some non-state armed groups attack schools and universities, and their students and staff, and hinder access to education. Armed groups have attacked schools for the last half century,[xvii] if not long before, and have occupied educational institutions in at least 25 countries since 2005.[xviii]

Non-state armed groups carried out approximately 55 percent of reported attacks on education in 2020 and 2021, while state forces perpetrated around 35 percent and ten percent were unidentified or the result of crossfire. During this two-year period, GCPEA identified approximately 4,500 reports of attacks on education.[xix]

Military use of schools and universities was distinct, however. In 2020 and 2021, armed groups perpetrated around 25 percent of reported military use incidents, while state forces perpetrated approximately 75 percent and a small fraction of reported incidents were unidentified. During this two-year period, GCPEA identified approximately 570 reported incidents of military use of schools and universities. To obtain these percentages, GCPEA analyzed data from the Education under Attack database, which compiles reports of attacks on education and military use from the United Nations (UN), non-government organizations, media outlets, and in-country sources (see the **METHODOLOGY** section above for details).

Several other sources support these findings concerning attacks on education and military use of educational facilities. GCPEA analyzed 2020 and 2021 data from the UN Secretary-General's *Children and Armed Conflict* reports to find that non-state armed groups carried out approximately 43 percent of attacks on schools *and* hospitals, as well as protected persons related to schools and hospitals, while state forces carried out around 37 percent of these same attacks, and 20 percent of violations were committed by unidentified perpetrators or due to crossfire, explosive remnants of war, or improvised explosive devices.[xx] Moreover, for *all grave violations*, the UN Secretary-General's *Children and Armed Conflict* report covering 2021 indicates, "Non-State armed groups were responsible for 55 per cent of violations, State forces for 25 per cent, and the remainder of the violations resulted from crossfire, the use of improvised explosive devices, explosive remnants of war and landmines, or were committed by unidentified perpetrators."[xxi] Finally, a Geneva Call and Protect Education in Insecurity and Conflict report found that, between 2008 and 2013, a majority of attacks on *schools* were carried out by non-state armed groups as compared to state forces and pro-state actors.[xxii]

The year 2022 was distinct, however, in large part due to the war in Ukraine. The UN Secretary-General's *Children and Armed Conflict* report covering 2022 indicates that overall, "government forces were the main perpetrator of … attacks on schools and hospitals…"[xxiii] After the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022, the report covered Ukraine for the first time and recorded far more verified attacks on schools and protected persons in relation to schools, at 461, than any other country in the report.[xxiv] Although some of the attacks on schools and hospitals were attributed to armed groups affiliated with the Russian armed forces, it is likely that the war in Ukraine, an international armed conflict fought primarily between two state armed forces, drove the reversal in the trend. Regardless, armed groups merit sustained consideration, since they continued to carry out attacks on education in 2022 and 2023.[xxv]

In 2020 and 2021, GCPEA identified reports of attacks on education perpetrated by armed groups in at least 25 countries. The Central Sahel region, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Syria, and Yemen were particularly affected by these attacks. Meanwhile, countries impacted by non-state armed groups reportedly using educational facilities for military purposes during this two-year period included Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen.[xxvi]

Typology of armed groups and their motives for attacking education

Given that a number of armed groups perpetrate attacks on education across dozens of countries, no one factor, such as belief system or level of organization, is likely to explain all such attacks and military use. Rather than examine individual groups, this section of the case study considers "types" of armed groups with shared characteristics to better understand which ones attack education while others refrain, and why.[xxvii] This information may be useful as civil society, international organizations, and governments determine where to direct efforts at curbing armed group-perpetrated attacks on education. The coming paragraphs lay out a typology of non-state armed groups, discuss factors that may determine whether these groups wield violence against civilians and civilian infrastructure, then consider armed group characteristics that appear to matter for whether they attack education in particular.

A legal scholar and the Words to Deeds research project propose a typology of non-state armed groups which divides these actors into three groups, based on their operational and organizational capabilities. The first, referred to as "'*de facto*' authorities," exercise state-like authority over territory and a population and may establish structures which oversee services such as health or law enforcement. The second type possesses less organization and control over territory and civilians and generally seeks to overthrow the government or political system; it may be referred to as "armed opposition movements." The final type exercises limited control over territory or a population and may be referred to as "militias." This type includes groups of armed civilians organized to defend their communities and groups that are pro-government but are not under effective state control.[xxviii]

Regardless of their position on the spectrum of operational and organizational capabilities, some non-state armed groups possess certain characteristics which, according to the academic and policy literatures, make them more likely to use **violence against civilians and civilian objects.** Five characteristics linked to increased propensity for violence against civilians are particularly relevant. First, some armed groups target civilians as a matter of strategy, rather

than focus violence against military targets—and some groups change strategies over time.[xxix] For instance, in 2009, Boko Haram appeared to only attack military targets in northern Nigeria; however, in subsequent years, the armed group began to attack civilians as well, according to an ICRC report.[xxx] Second, an armed group's organizational structure and control over rank-and-file members may determine whether the group uses violence against civilians. In Colombia, for instance, the disciplined, hierarchical FARC-EP armed group was able to curtail much opportunistic and indiscriminate violence that the ELN, which had looser control at the unit-level, appeared to tolerate.[xxxi] Third, non-state armed groups experiencing a leadership struggle or vacuum may engage in excessive violence against civilians as would-be leaders attempt to out-bid one another for the top position within the group.[xxxii] Relatedly, rival armed groups in the same territory may carry out excessive violence against civilians in attempts to out-bid one another for media attention, recruits, or resources.[xxxiii] Finally, the embeddedness of an armed group in a community may dictate the extent to which it uses violence against civilians. Armed groups disconnected from communities may frequently resort to violence; embedded groups, on the other hand, may show more restraint within their communities since they are reliant on those communities for recruits, resources, and other support, meaning community leaders, religious elders, or business elites may have influence over their conduct.[xxxiv]

Armed groups may also **target schools and universities, and their students and staff**.[4] First, schools and universities are "soft targets," meaning "a relatively unguarded site where people congregate, normally in large numbers, thus offering the potential for mass casualties."[xxxv] Relatedly, attacking a school or university, or students or educators, can produce significant media attention, since these are generally seen as protected spaces and persons. Some non-state armed groups seek media coverage as a means to attract attention, resources, and recruits to their cause, as well as to erode public support for a government unable to protect its people.[xxxvi] Third, some groups carry out attacks because they are opposed to the content of curricula, for instance that it is secular or "Western,"[xxxvii] while others are opposed to who is receiving an education, for instance girls.[xxxviii] Fourth, some separatist armed groups opposed to the language of instruction, or general education inequities related to region or ethnicity, boycott schools then target the education facilities, students, and educators who refuse to comply with the decree.[xxxix] Next, some armed groups view schools and their staff as agents or symbols of a state government they oppose; these schools and educators may then become targets.[xl] When schools serve as polling stations during elections, they also become targets for armed groups attempting to disrupt electoral processes or damage voting materials.[xli] Some other motivations for attacks include armed groups targeting educators for their activism, participation in unions, or ethnicity.[xlii] Armed groups may also target schools being used for military purposes by government forces,[xliii] or target schools as places of recruitment, given the large number of children unprotected by their parents.[xliv]

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4   Attacks on education include any threatened or actual use of force against students, teachers, academics, education support and transport staff (e.g., janitors, bus drivers), education officials, buildings, resources, or facilities (including school buses) perpetrated by armed forces, law enforcement, state security entities, and non-state armed groups. These attacks may result from intentional or indiscriminate violence. For more details, see: GCPEA, *Education under Attack 2022* (New York: Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2022), pp. 82-85.

Armed groups also use indiscriminate violence. While not the target, schools, universities, students, and staff may become caught in the crossfire when one armed group attacks another or state forces.[xlv]

Changes in their level of organization, and the absence or shifts in certain characteristics, may make armed groups less likely to wield violence against civilians generally or education in particular. For instance, a hierarchically organized armed group with a tight grip on rank-and-file members not facing an external or internal rival may be less likely to wield opportunistic or indiscriminate violence.[xlvi] Likewise, certain armed groups with a narrow follower-base might thrive off media attention, while others with broader constituencies may see negative media coverage as eroding support for their political objectives and lead them to refrain from committing headline-grabbing attacks on education.[xlvii] Although certain organizational capabilities and characteristics are long-lived, others may be readily changed by various factors, such as new leadership, shifts in territorial control, fluctuations in recruits or funding sources, and advances or defeats at the hands of other armed groups or state forces.[xlviii]

Finally, some armed groups may attack certain schools and universities, while protecting others or facilitating access to a distinct education system. This may occur due to shifts in the organizational capabilities and characteristics, which may lead armed groups over time to take a more benevolent or violent approach towards civilians generally and education in particular. Or, an armed group may protect its own education system, while attacking government or rival armed group-supported schools, universities, students, and educators.[xlix] In yet other cases, an armed group may arrest and detain teachers that refuse to teach its curriculum or that otherwise oppose its governance, while not attacking schools, as the Syrian Democratic Forces have done in recent years in northeast Syria.[1]

This section has demonstrated that armed groups' treatment of civilians and education is not static and that the proposed typology may be useful in understanding these groups' patterns of behavior. Drawing on these key points, TABLE 1 below introduces some practices, measures, and interventions that may lead some armed groups to reduce attacks on education.

Non-state armed groups using schools and universities for military purposes

Although several of the characteristics laid out above may affect whether armed groups use schools and universities for military purposes,[5] the practice appears to have a unique tactical logic. Close to the front lines, schools and universities are useful because they are often solidly constructed, sometimes with external fences; they may be in geographically advantageous locations, and they may have second or additional floors offering firing positions or vantage points for surveillance. These factors may provide armed groups a perceived advantage as they seek to defend or gain territory, particularly in shootouts and close-quarters combat, according to experts and interviews Geneva Call conducted with armed groups.[li] Further from the front lines, where territorial control is established, armed groups may select educational

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5   Military use occurs when armed forces or non-state armed groups partially or fully occupy schools or universities and use them for purposes that support a military effort. Common examples include using educational facilities as bases, barracks, and temporary shelters; fighting positions, weapons storage facilities, and detention and interrogation centers; and for military training or drill-ing soldiers. For more details, see: GCPEA, *Education under Attack 2022* (New York: Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2022), p. 85.

facilities based on their convenience compared to other buildings. Schools and universities provide shelter, and often offer electricity, plumbing, multiple rooms, and food stores as well as kitchens made for preparing large meals. These features make them useful in the short-run, whether to avoid the rain or gather the community for a meeting, and in the long-run, as barracks or detention centers, since multiple rooms are useful for separating individuals and playgrounds can become training grounds.[lii] Armed groups may also patrol or camp near schools, which they perceive as protecting learning; for instance, several armed groups expressed to Geneva Call that they used schools only when abandoned or if the schools, or their learners, were in immediate danger and required protection.[liii]

Given that armed groups perpetrated a minority of reported incidents of military use in 2020 and 2021 compared to military forces, the question arises: Why might armed groups be less prone to using schools and universities than military forces? First, military forces may view public educational facilities as being at their disposal, since they are government property;[liv] this is unlikely to be the case for most armed groups, except where they are providing education to communities. Next, with several notable exceptions, most armed groups lack the military advantage to control large swaths of territory unchallenged and so engage in hit-and-run attacks before retreating to their concealed headquarters or remote areas of operation. In these cases, military use of schools or universities may prove risky for armed groups, even calling the attention of government forces, who likely know the locations of public schools, to their whereabouts.[lv] For example, in Burkina Faso, al-Qaeda-linked and Islamic State-affiliated armed groups seem to remain in schools only briefly after carrying out threats or attacks, since staying could expose them to the security forces; instead, the armed groups return to the bush, forests, or villages where they blend in and are harder to locate.[lvi] GCPEA has identified few incidents of armed groups using schools for military purposes in recent years in that country.[lvii]

A party to conflict using a school or university for military purposes may also provoke an attack on the educational facility. Military use may turn schools and universities into military objectives, rendering them lawful targets of attack during armed conflict under international humanitarian law.[lviii] GCPEA found that following the February 2021 military takeover in Myanmar, more than a quarter of schools and universities used for military purposes that year were subsequently targeted by rival forces or armed groups.[lix] In addition, schools and universities may remain potential targets even after their military use has ended, and damages from attacks and remnants of war left behind during occupation may make reopening educational facilities difficult.

Non-state armed groups and provision of education

Around 12 percent of armed groups provide education, particularly those that deliver *de facto* governance and have enjoyed territorial control for several years.[lx] Armed groups appear to principally provide or support primary and secondary, rather than tertiary, education.[lxi] Several factors may lead armed groups to either establish their own education systems, support churches or humanitarian agencies to provide education, or allow government education. For one, when attempting to establish legitimacy or a benevolent relationship with

civilians, an armed group may wish to demonstrate respect for children, including through the provision of social services.[lxii] In other cases, armed groups lacking the capacity or territorial control to provide education may support religious institutions or aid agencies to do so, by for instance providing uniforms, food, financial aid, or partially covering the costs of running schools or rehabilitating them if damaged by conflict or natural disasters. In yet other contexts, armed groups without the capacity to provide education may allow government schooling to continue, out of either a respect for the importance or learning or in response to pressures from their constituency.[lxiii]

As one example, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), in partnership with the UN, implemented an early learning program that focused on training teachers and developing an Islamic curriculum for kindergartens in Bangsamoro region, the Philippines. The curriculum was jointly approved by the Tahderiyyah Advisory Panel (a school-based organization specializing in Islamic education), the MILF Tarbiyah (Committee on Education), and Central Committee for instruction in conflict-affected areas of Bangsamoro region. The curriculum was piloted in 2007 as the first Islamic early childhood education program and it aligned with Philippine learning standards to teach analytical and social emotional skills. A study conducted by the Mindanao State University-Maguindanao Graduate School found that the program elicited positive effects on the community including teachers' and parents' increased knowledge of early childhood education.[lxiv]

Education can nevertheless be politicized as part of the wider conflict, and the control of schools and universities can play into a government or armed group's broader administrative, territorial, or ideological objectives.[lxv] Some armed group-provided schooling may play a role in ensuring continuity of education, especially when humanitarian organizations or government teachers can no longer access an area due to conflict, such as in Myanmar where anti-junta groups are attempting to provide an alternative education system.[lxvi] However, the quality of schooling and respect for students' and teachers' rights within education vary widely between contexts.

Armed groups motivated by an ideology, religious tradition, or belief system considered "extremist" may develop and enforce their own curriculum, which may not represent the religion, language, or ideology of the population. For example, in Somalia, where the Somali language is widely spoken, al-Shabaab developed an Arabic-language curriculum as early as 2017,[lxvii] which the group later implemented in areas under its control.[lxviii] GCPEA found that a number of teachers were reportedly threatened or detained for resisting the curriculum.[lxix] In yet another example, non-state armed groups in central Mali allowed communities to reopen schools they had previously forcibly closed or threatened, however they required that the schools separate girl and boy students and teach in Arabic alongside French, the language in which the schools had previously held classes.[lxx]

The curricula developed by armed groups, or the instruction imparted by the teachers on their payroll or under their control, may not align with national curricular or pedagogical standards, which can cause tensions for communities or families that prefer the government education system. For example, in Syria in 2021, the Syrian Democratic Forces and its political wing

reportedly arrested at least 20 students for protesting the armed group's curriculum,[lxxi] as well as several teachers who continued to teach the Syrian government curriculum.[lxxii] An additional tension is students' ability to take national exams and enter higher education. For example, in Syria in 2020, the UN documented armed groups preventing students from crossing into government-controlled areas to take national end-of-year exams.[lxxiii]

Cameroon is yet another example of armed group and government curricula being at odds. There, armed separatists opposed to the state's French-language education system have violently enforced a boycott on education in the majority anglophone Northwest and Southwest regions of the country. The boycott, plus threats, killings, and abductions of teachers, have caused the vast majority of schools in those regions to close for multiple years.[lxxiv] Armed groups have opened schools in parts of the Northwest and Southwest regions, presumably to encourage English-language education, however the national government has urged communities to avoid sending their children to these schools.[lxxv]

The development and control of curricula may also enable armed groups to engrain their ideology more deeply in the populations where they operate. For example, the Islamic State established an education system in Iraq and Syria and developed a curriculum intended to impart its religious ideology, including segregation by gender.[lxxvi] In Yemen, the UN noted that the state's inability to pay teachers in Houthi-controlled areas of the country led many teachers to resign after 2017, allowing for Houthi authorities to place "volunteer" teachers and principals in schools to promote their ideology. In at least one governorate, Houthi volunteers made up at least 20 percent of all teachers by 2020. The UN found this to be a:

> common modus operandi for Houthi incitement to violence, child recruitment activities and propaganda in schools. Houthi Mobilisation Committees specifically targeted schools because of their large audiences of children, who were deemed more accepting of Houthi ideology and were potential future recruits. Activities in schools included weapons demonstrations, mandatory in-person radio and video speeches given both by Houthi leaders and students/teachers already associated with the Houthis who encouraged students to 'go to the frontlines' […] and, in some instances, military training of child recruits in school yards.[lxxvii]

Many non-state armed groups provide, or otherwise support, education; as such, policymakers and practitioners should see some armed groups perpetrating attacks on education within the wider context of other armed groups supporting this fundamental right. Nonetheless, it remains important to assess the extent to which schools run or supported by armed groups respect students' right to education, align with government-provided education to allow entrance into higher education, provide conflict-sensitive curricula, and are open to all children, including girls and ethnic and religious minorities.

IV. Analysis of attacks on education and military use of educational facilities in relation to armed groups

In GCPEA's *Education under Attack* 2022 report, most profiled countries experienced some combination of attacks on education and military use of educational facilities perpetrated by state armed forces and non-state armed groups. However, some types and sub-types of attacks on education are more commonly perpetrated by either state or non-state actors. During the 2020-2021 period, GCPEA identified over 5,000 reported attacks on education and incidents of military use particularly impacting 28 conflict-affected countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East.

GCPEA tracks five categories of attacks on education and the military use of schools and universities. Based on an analysis of the Education under Attack database, some trends in reported actors for each category follow.

Attacks on schools

Education under Attack 2022 found that attacks on schools made up approximately two-thirds of all reported attacks on education and military use incidents in 2020 and 2021.[lxxviii] Of these approximately 3,000 attacks, many involved state forces reportedly using air-dropped or ground-launched explosive weapons in populated areas, for example in Azerbaijan, Palestine, Yemen, and Syria.[lxxix] In other contexts, however, armed groups targeted schools. For example, in Mali in June 2020, armed groups threatened or attacked over 500 schools, according to the Education Cluster.[lxxx] Armed groups loot or vandalize schools, and use arson, improvised explosive devices, and small arms in their attacks on schools.

GCPEA identified examples of armed groups reportedly looting or vandalizing schools in several countries in 2020 and 2021 including Colombia, Nigeria, and across the Central Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.[lxxxi] For instance, the Burkina Faso Protection Cluster reported that on February 10, 2021, members of a non-state armed group looted the school in Koulfo, Manni district, Gnagna province, after threatening primary and middle school teachers.[lxxxii]

Armed groups also appear to use arson in targeted attacks on schools, in certain contexts. For example, on February 3, 2020, local media reported that a non-state armed group suspected to be the Taliban burned the Bodala Girls School in Taloqan, Takhar province; four classrooms, school equipment, and books were reportedly damaged in the fire.[lxxxiii] However, in other contexts, armed groups appear to set schools ablaze during arson attacks against villages generally or all government buildings in a village. For example, the Democratic Republic of Congo Protection Cluster reported that an armed group burned down the Primary and Professional Education administrative building during an attack on Irumu town, in Ituri province, on October 21, 2020.[lxxxiv] In another example, in Mozambique, Amnesty International documented that armed group fighters burned down a school, along with several government buildings, in Quissanga, Cabo Delgado province, on March 25, 2020.[lxxxv]

GCPEA has observed that non-state armed groups frequently use improvised explosive devices to target schools in certain contexts, such as in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan.[lxxxvi] This sub-type of attack on schools, and its use as a tactic by non-state armed groups, warrants further exploration. First, these attacks are destructive and often cause mass causalities. For example, in Somalia, al-Shabab claimed responsibility for a car bomb attack on the Ministry of Education while secondary students and their families collected diplomas, reportedly killing at least 121 people and wounding hundreds, on October 29, 2022.[lxxxvii] Second, many attacks on schools using improvised explosive devices appear to be targeted, as opposed to indiscriminate, violence. Since improvised explosive devices must be emplaced at or near schools, Action on Armed Violence reasons that most attacks on schools involving these devices are targeted and deliberate, as opposed to the wide-spread, collateral destruction inflicted by air-dropped or ground-launched explosives.[lxxxviii] Next, in certain conflicts, among attacks on education, the use of improvised explosive weapons appears more prevalent than the use of other explosive weapons types, such as shelling or airstrikes. Furthermore, armed groups appear more likely to use improvised explosive devices than state forces, particularly those armed groups with minimal operational capacity.

Armed groups ideologically opposed to a type of education, or the education of women and girls, have employed improvised explosive devices in attacks on schools, in countries including Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Pakistan.[lxxxix] For instance, in Nigeria, a Boko Haram-affiliated or splinter group allegedly attacked an open-air Islamic school on the outskirts of Maiduguri, Borno state, on January 31, 2020, reportedly by sending a 12-year-old girl to detonate a suicide bomb; three boy students and the girl were killed in the attack and four boy students were injured, according to local media.[xc]

In other cases, improvised explosive devices are deployed to deter either school attendance or voting when schools are used as polling stations. For example, in Myanmar, where schools and teachers have become politicized in the conflict following the military takeover, some armed groups opposed to the military junta have used explosives to deter attendance at state schools.[xci] Of all attacks on education involving explosive weapons in Myanmar in 2020 and 2021, improvised explosive devices and other explosive weapons directly emplaced at or near educational facilities were the most prevalent. Based on incident reports only, GCPEA determined that directly emplaced explosives made up approximately 92 percent of reported attacks involving explosives in Myanmar in 2020 and 2021, while ground-launched strikes including shelling, mortars, and grenades composed around six percent, and airstrikes on schools comprised only two percent of all attacks involving explosive weapons.[xcii] Also, GCPEA has noted that schools used as polling stations are susceptible to attacks using improvised explosive devices, as has occurred during elections in Afghanistan and India.[xciii]

Non-state armed groups also wield indiscriminate violence, which sometimes impacts schools even if not the original target. For example, in recent years in Colombia, armed groups have engaged state forces in shootouts using small arms near schools, sometimes while students are present and sometimes damaging the educational infrastructure.[xciv]

Improvised explosive devices are likely prevalent in attacks for factors inherent to schools and the armed groups that use this weapon. Schools are typically large, sturdy buildings, which may be under guard. Improvised explosive devices fit this target profile because they can be stealthily placed in or near a school, using a backpack, car, or other clandestine means, and their detonation can produce significant damage to the building beyond what is possible with small arms. However, an armed group must possess the organizational sophistication to build such devices if they are to be used in attacks. Some armed groups lack the precursor materials, the knowledge of how to mix them, the schematics to wire the device, or the wiring to detonate it.[xcv] In those cases, armed groups are likely to rely on small arms in attacks which they may acquire by ambushing government forces. Meanwhile, weaponry that is even more sophisticated, such as aircraft or artillery, is often beyond their reach, difficult to maintain, or requires advanced training.[xcvi]

Attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel

The attacks on school students, teachers, and staff category of attacks on education contains various sub-types, some of which are more likely to be perpetrated by either state forces or armed groups. State forces and police are typically responsible for the violent repression of education-related protests, or arrest students and teachers for their status as educators; in recent years, this has commonly occurred in India and Pakistan.[xcvii] An exception is the Syrian Democratic Forces reportedly arresting dozens of teachers in Syria in 2021 for their refusal to teach the armed group's curriculum.[xcviii] On the other hand, non-state armed groups are typically responsible for the abduction, killing, or threatening of school teachers or students, often for attending or teaching classes or for their political leanings. High-profile mass abductions have been common in Nigeria and Cameroon for example, whereas individual teachers are often threatened and targeted in the Central Sahel and Colombia, among other places. In the Central Sahel, armed groups have threatened, abducted, or killed teachers to incite fear and force schools to close.[xcix] While in Colombia, armed groups have reportedly threatened teachers for their membership in teachers' unions, or as a means to prevent the transfer of non-local teachers from other departments to areas where the group operates.[c]

GCPEA has found that abductions are most frequently perpetrated by armed groups and have become a common tactic, particularly when a group is ideologically opposed to a type of education or has otherwise politicized education within the context of a conflict, such as in the Central Sahel, Nigeria, and Cameroon. High-profile, mass abductions of school students may also be used as a tactic to generate media attention, as well as to generate income through ransoms.[ci] For example, in Cameroon, members of a separatist armed group abducted a teacher in Bafia, South-West region, after he refused to fly an "Ambazonia" flag outside the school where he worked, on August 5, 2020, according to Human Rights Watch. The armed group released the teacher in early September 2020, after receiving a ransom payment.[cii] GCPEA found that in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria, armed groups specifically targeted girls and women from schools for abduction and forced recruitment, including for sexual violence and forced marriage and to support military operations by cooking and cleaning or participating in combat.[ciii] However, boy students have also been abducted. In Nigeria, for example, armed assailants abducted 344 boy students from the Government Science Secondary School and killed a security guard in Kankara, Katsina state, in December 2020.[civ]

In Nigeria, more than 1,000 students were kidnapped from schools between December 2020 and September 2021.[cv] Although armed groups might abduct children from many places, schools are relatively easy targets, especially compared to markets or places of worship where parents, adults, and potentially security forces are present. Combined with their expressed opposition to "Western" education, Boko Haram and affiliated or splinter groups likely target boarding schools in rural areas to kidnap students precisely because many children are present in the hostels at night and are looked after by only a handful of adults. In response, state governments in Nigeria are relocating boarding schools to safer, well-populated areas and establishing dayshift, rather than boarding, schools.[cvi] Communities and parents are also coming together to escort students to and from distant schools to avoid abductions along school routes.[cvii] The government of Burkina Faso has also relocated schools, and student exams, to prevent attacks by non-state armed groups.[cviii]

Military use of schools and universities

Although state actors were responsible for the majority of instances of military use, non-state armed groups committed about a quarter of all reported cases in 2020 and 2021, as laid out above. Countries where non-state armed groups have reportedly used schools or universities for military purposes in recent years include Afghanistan, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, and Yemen.[cix]

Several examples of armed groups operating as *de facto* authorities using schools for bases exist. These groups appear to have more access to occupy schools since they control territory; for example, the Houthis used dozens of schools for military purposes in Yemen in 2020 and 2021.[cx] In Syria, armed groups with control over territory in the northeast of the country have used numerous schools as bases, detention centers, or sometimes as offices to support their governance activities. For example, a local human rights organization reported that, in July 2020, the Syrian Democratic Forces armed group was using a primary school in Gharanij town, Abu Kamal district, Deir-ez-Zor governorate, as an office for its Anti-Terrorism Department.[cxi] Also in northeast Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces have vacated schools and issued a military directive prohibiting the use of schools following advocacy by the UN and Fight for Humanity.[cxii]

Armed groups without firm territorial control have also used schools for military purposes, in many cases for a temporary period or to store weapons. For example, in Colombia, armed groups have reportedly used schools to hold community meetings in rural areas,[cxiii] store weapons,[cxiv] and in March 2020, an alleged FARC-EP dissident group camped in the vicinity of a school for several days near El Plateado town, in Cauca department, according to the Office of the Ombudsman.[cxv]

Child recruitment at, or on the way to or from, school

Although GCPEA has documented child recruitment by both state and non-state parties to conflict, this violation remains generally underreported.[cxvi] In past years, the UN verified child recruitment at, or en route to, school in Yemen and Somalia perpetrated by non-state armed groups. In Yemen, between May 2015 and June 2020, the Houthis recruited 49 boys

and nine girls from 34 schools across six governorates.[cxvii] In Somalia, al-Shabaab abducted three boys between the ages of 11 and 16 from a Quranic school in Juba Dhexe region on October 13, 2018.[cxviii]

Child recruitment and use can take place within the context of the military use of schools. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for instance, in December 2020, members of an armed group set up camp in the yard of a primary school in Masisi territory, North Kivu province. While using the school, they abducted around 33 students from a neighboring secondary school and used the students to transport their belongings.[cxix]

Sexual violence at, or on the way to or from, school and university

GCPEA lacked adequate data to determine trends in perpetrators of sexual violence at, or en route to, schools and universities. However, sporadic incidents of education-related sexual violence perpetrated by armed groups have been identified. For instance, in Burkina Faso, a witness told an international news outlet that during an attack on a school in 2021, the armed group raped a female teacher inside a classroom.[cxx] In South Sudan, a non-state armed group raped a female teacher during an attack on a primary school in Western Equatorial state in 2018; as a result, the school was closed for two months.[cxxi]

UN-verified data suggest that armed groups frequently perpetrate sexual violence against children, and particularly girls, in conflict.[cxxii] However, as with sexual violence in other settings, incidents of this violation perpetrated at, or on the way to or from, school or university by armed groups are infrequently reported, due to stigmatization, safety concerns, and fear of reprisals.

Attacks on higher education

Many attacks on higher education students and academics are perpetrated by police and state forces. For example, in India, Pakistan, and Turkey state forces and police were reportedly responsible for the violent repression of on-campus or education-related protests in recent years, or the arrest or detention of academics for their scholarship or status as educators.[cxxiii] However, non-state armed groups also threaten, detain, abduct, and kill higher education students and staff. For example, in Colombia, pamphlets were circulated by an alleged armed group at the University of Antioquia, in Medellín, threatening ten campus organizations and unions, as well as the lives of five students and professors for their suspected leftist leanings, on March 2, 2020.[cxxiv]

Armed groups also wield violence against higher education facilities, oftentimes using explosive weapons. Some attacks involving explosives appear indiscriminate; for example, in Yemen, Al Hudaydah University's Faculty of Engineering was located on a front line and was struck by shelling numerous times in 2020 and 2021.[cxxv] However, other attacks on university facilities appear targeted, including attacks recorded in Nigeria, Myanmar, and Afghanistan. For example, the Nigerian military repelled a Boko Haram attack on the University of Maiduguri, in Borno state, during the night of September 15, 2019, which reportedly lasted for one and a half hours and involved the armed group shooting at the military forces stationed outside the university and sending a man to detonate a suicide bomb.[cxxvi] Also, in Myanmar, in May 2021, a bomb

exploded at Taunggyi Technological University in Taungyii town, Shan state; a People's Defense Force took responsibility for the attack, according to media reports.[cxxvii] Finally, gunmen stormed Kabul University on November 2, 2020, where they detonated explosives, engaged in a gunfight with state security forces, and held dozens of students and staff hostage in classrooms. The attack, later claimed by the Islamic State of Khorasan Province, lasted over five hours; about 22 students (ten women)[cxxviii] were killed and over 20 wounded (including many women).[cxxix] The attack damaged classrooms and educational materials in the university and affected the learning of more than 21,000 students (over 7,000 women), based on 2018 numbers.[cxxx]

Attacks on female students and educators

The majority of attacks targeting female students and teachers, and their education facilities, are perpetrated by non-state armed groups. In certain contexts, such as Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Pakistan, armed groups have targeted female students and teachers or their education facilities in an effort to obstruct their access to learning.[cxxxi] For example, in Afghanistan, an unidentified armed group detonated a carful of explosives outside Sayed Shuhada High School, a girls' school near Kabul, on May 8, 2021, according to media reports. Around 85 civilians were killed and 240 were injured in the attack, the majority of whom were reported to be schoolgirls aged 11 to 18.[cxxxii] The attack also damaged the school building and its supplies. In addition to affecting girls, the attack reportedly targeted the ethnic Hazara community.[cxxxiii]

In other cases, armed groups have committed sexual violence against female students or recruited or used them, such as in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, and Yemen. For example, a GCPEA report found that, in the Kasai region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Kamuina Nsapu militia raped female students and school staff during attacks on schools or as girls fled attacks.[cxxxiv]

V. Practices, interventions, and measures that may reduce non-state armed group attacks on education and military use of educational facilities

Several practices, interventions, and measures may curb armed groups from attacking education or using educational facilities for military purposes. Non-state armed groups generate some of these practices internally, while other interventions and measures come from communities, governments, and local or international non-governmental organizations. **TABLE 1** introduces these practices.

TABLE 1.

Practices, interventions, and measures that may reduce armed group attacks on education and military use

PRACTICE, MEASURE, OR INTERVENTION	DESCRIPTION
Local, community, or armed group level	
Local non-governmental organization trainings with armed groups on human rights or the protection of civilians	Local organizations may lead trainings on local laws, civilian protection, and respect for the right to education; the aim of these trainings may be armed groups holding their members accountable for violations.[cxxxv] (This practice depends heavily on what is safe and legal in specific contexts; in many countries this is not a viable option).[cxxxvi] • *Example*: In Yemen, local civil society organizations have trained armed groups in local laws, the protection of civilians, and steps to reduce civilian harm; they have seen armed group leadership hold members accountable for rights violations.[cxxxvii]
Local leaders or communities engage in dialogue with armed groups	Business elites, religious or tribal leaders, or local media may have influence over armed groups which they may use to pressure the group into refraining from using violence near the community, respecting the right to education, or vacating occupied schools.[cxxxviii] Also, when united, communities may be able to negotiate with armed groups, even without local elites.[cxxxix] (This practice depends heavily on what is safe and legal in particular contexts; in many countries this is not a viable option).[cxl] • *Example*: In central Mali, between 2020 and 2022, community leaders have negotiated with non-state armed groups to reopen schools and, in some cases, for militants to move their bases further from town and refrain from planting mines nearby. The schools, however, were required to teach Arabic alongside French and separate girl and boy students; the communities also agreed to follow a strict version of Sharia (Islamic law).[cxli] • *Example*: Supported by an international organization, the community in Mopti, Mali, used the Safe Schools Declaration and *Guidelines* to negotiate with an armed group for the reopening of schools. The international organization translated the documents into the local language and conducted sensitization activities with community members.[cxlii]

Armed group codes of conduct, standing orders, military manuals, internal documents, and decrees	Armed groups may put internal rules into place to control members' behavior, including their conduct towards civilians and education.[cxliii] • *Example*: In 2021, the Coalition of Movements for Change, operating in the Democratic Republic of Congo, issued a unilateral statement on the protection of children and education during armed conflict, including to "…not attack education facilities…and not loot or divert goods destined for educational purposes…"[cxliv] • *Example*: In 2011, the National Transitional Council/Free Libyan Army released internal guidelines stating, "DO NOT harm cultural, educational and religious buildings and historic sites unless…such harm is absolutely necessary." • *Example*: In 2020, the Syrian Democratic Forces issued a military order to refrain from using schools and universities for military purposes or placing weapons and military equipment near educational facilities, as well as forbidding the targeting of educational facilities unless absolutely necessary (issued after UN action plan signed and Fight for Humanity advocacy conducted).[cxlv]
Commitments by one armed group influencing another armed group	One armed group committing to respect international humanitarian law or human rights may positively influence another armed group to do the same.[cxlvi] • *Example*: In northern Mali, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad putting into place policies, such as child protection and the prohibition of sexual violence, impacted the polices of allied groups in the Coordination of Movements of Azawad.[cxlvii]
Armed group belief systems	Armed groups may respect civilians and civilian infrastructure based on a commitment to protect their own population or as a part of their cultural, religious, or ideological precepts, ranging from Islamic law, "warrior culture," class struggle, or "revolutionary humanism."[cxlviii] • *Example*: The Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines draws on Islamic law as the basis of respect for the civilian population.[cxlix] • *Example*: The High Islamic Council of Mali issued a Fatwa (a ruling on a point of Islamic law) against conflict-related sexual violence in 2023.[cl]
National level	
Ceasefire agreements, peace negotiations, and peace treaties	A ceasefire agreement "…regulates the cessation of all military activity for a given length of time in a given area. It may be declared unilaterally, or it may be negotiated between parties to a conflict."[cli] Ceasefire agreements may include protections for education. • *Example*: The Government of Myanmar and several ethnic armed organizations signed a ceasefire agreement in 2015 which included provisions to "Avoid the destruction…of schools…and the use of such places as military bases or outposts."[clii]
Accountability	Accountability for attacks on education in domestic or international courts may deter would-be perpetrators from committing similar crimes.[cliii] • *Example*: On June 19, 2019, a Kenyan court convicted three men who were accused of crimes in connection with the April 2015 Garissa University College attack carried out by al-Shabaab.[cliv]

Governments de-politicizing education	Governments can take practical steps to de-politicize education and adopt conflict-sensitive approaches to education in armed conflict settings. Doing so may build peace generally, but also remove the reason for armed groups targeting schools, universities, students, and educators.[clvi] • *Example*: Experts and international organizations urge governments and education providers to grant all students equitable access to education and hire teaching staff equitably, regardless of ethnicity, language, religion, or other differences; ensure curricula and teaching practices are inclusive of minority groups and languages; and consider conflict dynamics when designing education programing and curricula.[clv] Specifically, governments and education providers should consider their methods for teaching courses such as history and whether students should be obliged to sing the national anthem, attend nationalistic ceremonies, or wear uniforms that symbolize the government, since these may contribute to politicizing education and provide justifications especially for separatist non-state armed groups to attack facilities, students, and educators.[clvi]
State armed forces refraining from using educational facilities for military purposes	State armed forces refraining from using schools or universities for military purposes would almost certainly reduce non-state armed group-perpetrated attacks on education, given that armed groups sometimes target schools and universities precisely because state militaries are occupying them. (The reverse also occurs). • *Example*: GCPEA has identified reports of state forces using schools and universities for military purposes which then provoked attacks by non-state armed groups in at minimum Burkina Faso, India, Myanmar, and Turkey.[clvii]
Military forces may influence pro-government armed groups	Military forces may have sway over pro-government non-state armed groups; military forces may engage armed group leadership to encourage respect for civilians.[clviii] • *Example*: In Nigeria, military officers have intervened to change Civilian Joint Task Force leaders' behavior in favor of respecting civilians.[clix]
International level	
International military forces may influence armed groups	International military forces may influence armed groups to respect civilians, or could do so, given the leverage they hold through financing, matériel transfers, and trainings.[clx]
Government measures and multinational bodies, such as the UN Security Council, may influence armed groups	Sanctions against armed groups or their leaders may curb abuses against civilians.[clxi] These may include asset freezes, travel bans, and arms embargoes.
Tools designed to protect children in armed conflict such as UN action plans	An action plan is "…a written, signed commitment between the United Nations and those parties who are listed as having committed grave violations against children in the Secretary-General's Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict."[clxii] Action plans are usually linked to the specific grave violation for which a party to conflict is listed in the Secretary General's annual report, so a party listed for attacks on schools and hospitals would be expected to have an action plan with "concrete and time-bound activities to halt and prevent future attacks and threats of attacks on schools, hospitals and related protected persons."[clxiii] There are 11 armed groups listed in the 2022 Secretary-General's report for attacks on schools or hospitals.[clxiv] • *Example*: The Houthis, operating in Yemen, signed an action plan in 2022 to end attacks on schools along with other grave violations against children.[clxv]

International non-governmental organization initiatives such as Geneva Call deeds of commitment and unilateral declarations	Both are pledges to respect international humanitarian norms. A deed of commitment is an "innovative mechanism" which allows armed groups to "pledge their respect for humanitarian norms and be held publicly accountable for their commitments," and which is signed by the armed group and countersigned by Geneva Call (as witness) and the Government of the Republic and Canton of Geneva (as custodian).[clxvi] Unilateral declarations are, "Public undertakings made by AGDAs [armed groups] in which they pledge to abide by humanitarian norms..." and may be the first step towards signing a deed of commitment.[clxvii] • *Example*: The Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Patani, an armed group operating in Thailand, signed a deed of commitment for the protection of children in 2020, including to "avoid using for military purposes schools…"[clxviii]
International organizations engaging armed groups and communities to raise awareness about international humanitarian law, as well as norms and obligations to protect civilians and civilian objects	International organizations may carry out humanitarian engagements with armed groups to mitigate protection of civilian concerns and conduct trainings on international humanitarian and human rights law, as well as socialize a "culture of restraint" in armed groups so that norms and rules become so socially accepted they are followed even in the heat of battle.[clxix] International organizations also conduct trainings with communities on the obligations armed groups have to protect civilians.[clxx] • *Example*: In 2019, the Syrian Democratic Forces signed an action plan with the UN to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children under 18. Fight for Humanity, in partnership with the UN, held trainings on the contents and obligations of the action plan for the armed group, particularly for new recruits, recruitment officers, and military trainers, and including reference materials, videos, and a learning platform. Fight for Humanity also conducted awareness-raising campaigns with the community in northeast Syria on the Syrian Democratic Forces' obligations to prevent child recruitment and protect education and healthcare through posters, leaflets, booklets, social media, and videos (on local TV and social media), reaching over two million people.[clxxi]

TABLE 1 covers practices, interventions, and measures that may limit armed group violence against civilians generally or attacks on education in particular. The table and several activities in it merit further comment; these include factors outside the table that may curb attacks, safety concerns when engaging armed groups, and the prevalence and efficacy of deeds of commitment, action plans, and ceasefire agreements.

Do not use schools and universities for any military purpose

If you do, they will lose their protection from attack

One page from a Geneva Call booklet, which serves as guidance to fighters and leaders of armed non-state actors on how to ensure the protection of education in armed conflict. The content is based on international law, the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict*, and good practices.

© Geneva Call

Additional factors beyond the practices, interventions, and measures listed in **TABLE 1** may reduce the likelihood that armed groups wield violence against civilians generally or against schools, universities, students, and educators in particular; however, these factors are excluded from the table since civil society and international organizations are almost certainly unable to wield influence over them. For example, as laid out in **SECTION III** above, hierarchically organized armed groups with a tight grip on rank-and-file members, or those not facing internal or external rivals, may in some situations be less likely to wield opportunistic or indiscriminate violence against civilians and civilian objects. However, changing an armed group's organizational structure is almost certainly beyond the reach of civil society and international organizations.

Engagement with armed groups may be circumscribed in some settings—whether due to the armed groups' ideology or worldview, governments outlawing engagement with armed groups, or safety concerns. First, humanitarian engagement may be constrained with certain non-state armed groups, such as al-Shabab, according to some experts.[clxxii] For instance, certain armed groups may view humanitarian agencies as representing Western governments and go so far as to kidnap aid workers for ransom.[clxxiii] Second, counterterrorism laws sometimes keep communities and humanitarian organizations from engaging non-state armed groups.[clxxiv] Finally, community leaders negotiating with armed groups may not be safe or practicable in many contexts. In these cases, civil society and international organizations will likely have little or no leverage to influence armed groups to refrain from attacking schools, universities, students, or educators.

Even though communities have had some success negotiating with armed groups in Mali and Colombia for instance,[clxxv] doing so seems to be unsafe and unfeasible in other contexts, such as Burkina Faso and Nigeria.[clxxvi] **TABLE 1** offers examples of local non-governmental organizations, elites, or communities engaging in dialogue or negotiating with non-state armed groups for the protection of civilians generally or to reopen schools specifically. However, documented best practices must be shared only when deemed safe, and the presumption must be that civilians are the experts in their context and the activities which are safe to undertake, if any, especially as they are the ones who will live with the consequences of the activities. It may also be worth building on existing activities from that context, rather than importing new ones from elsewhere, as a means to respect civilians' local knowledge and agency.[clxxvii]

Some non-state armed groups appear not to attack schools, universities, students, or educators, or to rarely carry out such attacks. Likewise, some non-state armed groups may sign deeds of commitment or update their codes of conduct for a violation which they rarely commit, lending them legitimacy with domestic audiences or their foreign-government sponsors in the United States or Europe, but bringing about little meaningful change.[clxxviii] In both cases, pursuing the agreements and policy changes laid out in **TABLE 1** may still be worthwhile as a means to hamstring the armed group from committing the violation in the future, for instance if there is a leadership change or spike in conflict, or as a step towards the armed group prohibiting other, more prevalent violations. However, given time and resource limitations, acknowledging that some armed groups have a track record of restraint and others may agree to refrain from attacks only as a tokenistic commitment may be worthwhile when developing workplans.

Geneva Call has conducted trainings and awareness raising sessions on the protection of education with armed groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Sudan, Syria, and Thailand, among other countries;[clxxix] the organization has signed Deeds of Commitment for the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict, which generally include the protection of education, in countries including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Syria, and Yemen.[clxxx] Meanwhile, Fight for Humanity has worked with armed groups to promote IHL and child protection, including the safeguarding of education in Syria, briefly in Cameroon, and elsewhere.[clxxxi] Finally, in addition to engaging with armed groups to promote international humanitarian law and for access to populations in need of aid, the ICRC has developed several reports and training manuals about and for armed groups protecting civilians and civilian infrastructure generally and students, educators, and education facilities in particular. These include *The Roots of Restraint in War, Reducing Civilian Harm in Urban Warfare: A Handbook for Armed Groups, and Example Rules for Fighters*.[clxxxii]

It is worth noting that, once inked, non-state armed groups may not comply with deeds of commitment, action plans, or their own codes of conduct. For instance, the People's Protection Units/Women's Protection Units in Syria was reported to have attacked a school two years after it signed a deed of commitment with Geneva Call.[clxxxiii]

TABLE 1 includes examples of humanitarian organizations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva Call, and Fight for Humanity, engaging armed groups on international humanitarian law. This raises the question: Why would non-state armed groups comply with international humanitarian law? Among other motivations, armed groups may respect the laws of war because they align with political, religious, or customary rules the group follows; out of respect for human dignity; for legitimacy among local or international communities; out of fear of prosecution for international crimes; for the strategic incentive that respecting norms may lead their enemy to do the same; or due to family or other ties to a nearby community.[clxxxiv]

TABLE 1 also covers the potential connection between ceasefire agreements or peace negotiations and a decrease in attacks in education, particularly if the former include a provision for the protection of education. On the one hand, in Thailand, after peace talks between the Barisan Revolusi Nasional separatist armed group and the government resumed in January 2022,[clxxxv] GCPEA has identified fewer reported attacks on education than in previous years.[clxxxvi] Similarly, in Yemen, reports of attacks on education facilities identified by GCPEA significantly declined during the UN-mediated truce between April 2022 and October 2022. During that period, no reported attacks were documented, according to Safer Yemen; in comparison, in the six months prior, 15 incidents of armed violence were reported to have impacted education facilities.[clxxxvii] Moreover, Mwatana, a Yemeni human rights organization, identified just one incident of shelling of a school during the six-month truce while still documenting over 20 cases of military use by Houthis.[clxxxviii] On the other hand, in Colombia, conflict violence in rural areas generally, and attacks on education in particular, have trended upwards since the signing of peace accords in 2016 between the government and FARC-EP, the country's largest armed group.[clxxxix] Further research is needed to explore this relationship.

VI. Recommendations

This scoping paper provided background on non-state armed groups and discussed characteristics inherent to many which may relate to their attacking schools and universities, students and educators, or refraining from the same. Trends in armed group-perpetrated attacks on education were also presented. Finally, this scoping paper revealed practices, interventions, and measures that communities, governments, and local and international non-governmental organizations employ in attempts to curb violence against civilians generally and attacks on education in particular.

Despite the focus on armed groups, state military forces are also indispensable for safe education. For one, states are also prohibited under international law during armed conflict from attacking civilians and civilian objects,[cxc] including schools and universities that are not being used for military purposes, and their students and staff. States also have obligations under international human rights law, which is applicable during wartime as well as peacetime, to protect the rights of persons living within their territories.[cxci] International human rights law protects the rights of students, teachers, and educators to life and security,[cxcii] as well as the right to education.[cxciii] When government security forces' use of school undermines children's access to education, they may be violating children's right to education guaranteed under international human rights law, most notably in international conventions such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Upholding these rights not only means ensuring that students can receive an education but creates obligations for states acting to protect schools and universities from attack by armed groups.[cxciv]

Several strategic reasons also exist for states to protect education. It has long been recognized that government security forces that commit widespread abuses are an important factor behind people joining anti-government armed groups and become "justifications" for rebel abuses.[cxcv] While the converse is not necessarily true—that a government force that upholds the laws of war will deter recruitment or compel armed groups to better respect international law—a state that upholds its international legal obligations during wartime may benefit practically by winning over the population.[cxcvi] It also places the state in a stronger position to criticize abuses by armed groups.

GCPEA reports have shown that military forces using education facilities sometimes prompted armed groups to target the same schools or universities.[cxcvii] By respecting civilians and civilian objects, state military forces may encourage armed groups to show the same respect, reduce the civilian abuses that so often result in deadly retaliation, and cut the number of armed group attacks on schools by ensuring that they remain civilian objects, not military targets.

To better protect education from attack, governments, international organizations, and civil society groups should take non-state armed group characteristics into account. Considerations include whether the group targets schools, universities, students,

and educators or instead carries out indiscriminate attacks that impact education;[6] whether rights-respecting states patronize the armed group; what type of structure and organizational capacity the armed group has; whether the group espouses an ideology against "Western" education or an educational system dominated by the majority group; among others introduced in **SECTION II**. Certain approaches are more likely to find traction with some types of armed groups. For instance, armed groups that target schools because they view educational institutions as representing the state may be dissuaded from carrying out such attacks by efforts to de-politicize education, while armed groups that wield indiscriminate violence near schools may be dissuaded by awareness raising among rank-and-file members about the importance of education.

Non-state armed groups should:

- *Protect the civilian character of schools and universities and cease attacks and threats of attacks against students, teachers, academics, and educational facilities.* In cases of doubt whether an object which is normally dedicated to civilian purposes, such as a school, is being used to make an effective contribution to military action, it should be presumed to be a civilian object.

- *Refrain from using schools and universities for military purposes, including by using the* Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict (Guidelines) and incorporating them, as relevant, into their doctrine, manuals, orders, and trainings to encourage appropriate practice throughout the chain of command.[7]

- *Avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects* in populated areas, including near schools or universities or along routes to or from them, and develop operational policy based on a presumption against such use.

- *Sign and implement Geneva Call's Deed of Commitment for the Protection of Children from the Effects of Armed Conflict, including as it relates to educational spaces.*

- If listed in the UN Secretary-General's *Children and Armed Conflict* report for attacks on schools, either *carry out the activities in the action plan to stop and prevent attacks or approach the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to sign an action plan.*

States and armed forces should:

- *Protect the civilian character of schools and universities and cease attacks and threats of attacks against students, teachers, academics, and educational facilities.*

- *Endorse, implement, and support the Safe Schools Declaration to ensure that all students and educators can learn and teach in safety.*

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6   In the former case, the underlying reason for which armed groups are targeting education will need to be addressed or they will need to be convinced of the consequences of domestic or international law; in the latter, armed groups will need to be convinced that education is sacrosanct, and conflict should be moved away from schools and universities.

7   Only states may endorse the Safe Schools Declaration, but non-state armed groups are invited to use the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict*.

- ***Refrain from using schools and universities for military purposes, including by incorporating the*** Guidelines ***into military doctrine, policy, manuals, and trainings.*** Military forces using education facilities have sometimes prompted armed groups to target the same schools or universities, meaning that reduced military use of educational facilities is likely to reduce armed group attacks on them.

- ***Refrain from using schools and universities as polling stations where doing so is assessed as unsafe.*** When educational facilities serve as polling stations during elections in some contexts, they have become targets for armed groups attempting to disrupt electoral processes or damage voting materials. Not using schools and universities for these purposes may limit non-state armed group attacks on education.

- ***Where appropriate and practicable, take steps to depoliticize education in regions or departments where armed groups are attacking schools, universities, students, or teachers for political reasons.*** For instance, the armed group may perceive the government's curriculum as repressing a minority language or culture.

- If providing financing, training, or matériel to non-state armed groups ***urge them to respect human rights, refrain from using schools and universities for military purposes, and maintain the presumption of educational facilities as civilian objects unless occupied by armed parties in their engagement with armed groups.***

- ***Consider imposing or threatening sanctions against armed groups or their leaders if they attack schools or universities, or their students and staff.***

Civil society, international organizations, and donors should:

- ***Document and share measures taken by communities, armed groups, states, or international organizations to prevent or mitigate attacks on education by armed groups.*** Although these measures are context-specific and typically must be adapted when shared (including an assessment of whether they may produce harm), such measures may inspire steps to protect education elsewhere.

  - *At the community level*, document good practices to protect education, such as early warning systems and community leaders negotiating with armed groups (when safe and practicable).[8]

  - *At the armed group level,* document codes of conduct, standing orders, military manuals, internal documents, decrees, and interpretations of religion or ideology that safeguard education so they might be used as points of reference when engaging armed groups.

  - *At the national level,* collect ceasefire agreements, peace negotiation documents, and peace treaties with strong language protecting education so that they can be shared with governments or armed groups during negotiations.

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8   Examples of other promising practices include constructing fences, hiring security guards, community members and parents escorting students to school in a group, and interventions to prevent abductions of students such as relocating boarding schools from distant to safer areas or establishing more dayshift, rather than boarding, schools. Also worth documenting are non-governmental organizations' efforts to seed good practices in communities, such as trainings on "see something, say something," and risk awareness, as well as developing contingency plans and safety committees.

- *At all levels,* gather promising practices from local and international organizations, the UN, and elsewhere of engaging with armed groups to safely vacate educational facilities or reduce attacks on education, whether through negotiation, action plans, raising awareness, naming and shaming, or other means.

- *Incorporate the* **Guidelines** *into trainings and materials when engaging with armed groups in contexts where attacks on education occur.*

- *Develop training materials on the Safe Schools Declaration and* **Guidelines** *for local communities and community leaders, where assessed as safe to do so. Relatedly, translate key documents including the Safe Schools Declaration and* **Guidelines** *into local languages,* permitting better dissemination and awareness raising among affected communities and armed groups. Working with partners to culturally adapt training materials for specific contexts should also be considered.

- *Share data with accountability mechanisms so that these mechanisms may further investigate incidents or establish patterns of non-state armed group attacks on education.* For example, these data might be useful for behind-the-scenes advocacy with governments that support the establishment of an international mechanism with a focus on children's right to education, during the opening of new investigations by International Commissions of Inquiry or the International Criminal Court, or during the establishment of a new mechanism by the UN Human Rights Council.

- *Further engage the Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas agenda,[9]* since armed groups have commonly emplaced improvised explosive devices in schools and universities.

- *Continue researching armed groups and attacks on education,* including efforts to prevent, mitigate, and respond to these attacks. (See next section for additional details).

- *Advocate for peace talks, negotiations, or accords to include protection of education, where appropriate.* This may be supported by the collection and sharing of ceasefire agreements, peace negotiation documents, and peace treaties with strong language protecting education.

- *Work with governments to further implement the Safe Schools Declaration among relevant ministries and bodies as a means to reduce attacks on education by non-state armed groups, where appropriate.* Where existing practices, such as early warning systems or conflict-sensitive curricula, would likely curb attacks by non-state armed groups but implementation has stalled, civil society and international organization efforts may be well spent continuing advocacy to ensure lawmakers and ministry staff maintain a sense of urgency and that international support remains available to them.[10]

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9   Based around the Political Declaration on the Protection of Civilians from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas, this agenda seeks to raise awareness about harm done to civilians by explosive weapons and to reduce such suffering, among other activities. For more details: see the webpage of the International Network on Explosive Weapons.

10   In some contexts, the barriers to safeguarding education from attack by non-state armed groups appear to be lack of funding, coordination, and ownership of the agenda, rather than the need for new policies or good practices. Efforts to maintain urgency might include advocating at the international level for funding for education in emergencies as well as the inclusion of safe schools in national budgets, applying pressure on national lawmaking bodies or ministries to implement policies where political will waning, and encouraging relevant ministries to take ownership of the safe schools agenda.

- ***Conduct advocacy around the UN Security Council*** for stronger language in resolutions and con-clusions, to initiate action plans, or list parties to conflict in the Secretary General's reports for attacks on schools.

- ***Create a community of practice*** that can be called upon when partners in the field request trainings on non-state armed groups and attacks on education or ask to be put in contact with organizations that have successfully worked to curb abuses. This network could be made up of experts in negotiation, practical applications of international humanitarian law, monitoring and reporting, and related fields; using documented good practices, they could travel to an affected area, provide trainings, or offer guidance to partners on how best to work towards reducing military use of educational facilities and attacks on education by armed groups.

Recommendations for further research

This scoping paper concludes with three questions concerning armed groups and attacks on education for further exploration:

- Do ceasefires, peace negotiations, or peace agreements between governments and armed groups lead to reductions in armed-group perpetrated attacks on education? If so, must language on safeguarding education be included in negotiations or agreements for reductions to take place? Furthermore, what are the potential avenues through which reductions, or increases, might occur (e.g., armed group leadership ordering rank-and-file fighters to safeguard education, civil society groups raising awareness among armed parties, accountability mechanisms)?

- Have deeds of commitment, action plans, or changes in codes of conduct led armed groups to reduce attacks on education or military use of educational facilities? Under what conditions are these successful or not?

- What armed group characteristics, such as leadership or community support, are most related to reductions or increases in attacks on education and military use of schools and universities? This question could be researched through two avenues. First, one armed group could be analyzed over time to determine if a shift in a relevant characteristic leads to any observable fluctuation in the rate of attack on education or military use of education facilities. Second, a collection of armed groups could be compared that are otherwise similar but for the frequency with which they carry out attacks on education. If one or more armed group characteristics are distinct among them, these characteristics may be linked to the propensity to carry out attacks and worth further investigation.

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