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Collecting Junk from Rubble, Child Victims in Raqqa City

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Several of the children of the city of Raqqa pull out junk from under the rubble of the destroyed buildings. This phenomenon poses a danger to these children's lives, for dozens of mine explosion incidents were recorded while junk was collected, leading to the death and injury of many children and cases of mutilation. The phenomenon is growing under the absence of censorship from the local authorities and the unavailability of an official census of the number of child victims due to this occupation.

On the duration between the 3rd and 7th of November 2018, Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ interviewed a number of the children who collect junk from the rubble; it also met two officials of the Raqqa City Civil Council, which is affiliated with the Self-Management, and the US-led coalition backed Reconstruction Committee.

Hussain, a 12-year-old boy, who extracts junk from under the rubble, said:

"Since the city of Raqqa was liberated from Daesh, I have been working in extracting materials from the rubble; I collect steel, concrete, copper and everything that appears in my way. I abandoned school and started to work to make some money for my family. On the same day, I collect the materials and sell them for about 1500 to 2500 Syrian pounds. We saw a lot of mines between the rubble and kept away from them. Our work is dangerous; we are aware of this, but we are compelled."¹

Both of Hussain's sister, 8-year-old, and brother, 9-year-old, also left school, while Mohammad, 14-year-old, said that a mine exploded near him upon collecting junk, due to which his hand and leg were mutilated.

¹ The Arabic acronym for ISIS.



One of the children who collect junk looking at his mates while leaving school in the al-Thakaneh neighborhood, the city of Raqqa. Taken on: September 25, 2018. Photo credit: STJ.

In an unofficial census, local activists at the city of Raqqa **estimate that 12 to 15 children died due to mine explosions upon collecting junk materials, while estimated 25 children are injured since the Syrian Democratic Forces/SDF controlled the city of Raqqa.**

Concerning the phenomenon, the local activist Mohammad Osman said:

“About 25% children in the city of Raqqa are working; they are on different professions, such as working for car maintenance workshops, as vendors and other jobs. However, a majority works in extracting junk materials from the rubble, as it generates more money than other professions. This profession started with the SDF’s control of the city, and despite the risk it involves, it is the largest source of income to children, as they collect the materials from under the rubble and sell them to a junk merchant called “Ammar Abu Wardeh”, from the city of As-Safira, Aleppo, and based in the city of Raqqa. He is an infamous person, known for exploiting the children and employing them for his own interest. He buys the materials from them according to weight, and a child’s average daily income is about 2000 Syrian pounds. For his turn, Abu Wardeh sells these materials in the Syrian regular forces’ control areas.”

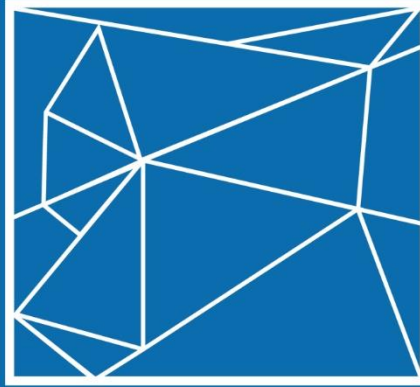
Aboud al-Khalaf, director of the media office of the Reconstruction Committee, said:

“The domestic committee, concerned with documenting mine explosion incidents and victims, does not have accurate statistics about the victims, but there is an approximate census, where the number of people injured due to mine explosions since the city of Raqqa was controlled is estimated with about three thousand persons and about 700 dead others, men, women and children. There is not an accurate statistical estimation about children, killed or injured.”

Al-Khalaf pointed out that the work of organizations, specialized in demining, is not done yet, for new mines are always planted, which are not the leftover or the remnants of Daesh. In addition to this, working on rubble removal has not finished so far for the people are renovating their houses and placing the rubble on the streets, which necessitates that rubble be removed several times from the same street.

About the procedures undertaken by the local authorities as to limit the phenomenon and prevent child labor in a dangerous environment, Mustafa al-Abed, director of the media office of the local council in the city of Raqqa, said that the procedures are restricted to conducting awareness campaigns for children at schools as to inform them of **the damage caused by working to children under 12-year-old**. However, so far no steps have been made against the people employing children, and they are not prosecuted by the Internal Security Service, for the procedures are still in the beginning.

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About Syrians for Truth and Justice:

STJ is an independent, nongovernmental organization whose members include Syrian human rights defenders, advocates and academics of different backgrounds and nationalities.

The initiative strives for SYRIA, where all Syrian citizens (females and males) have dignity, equality, justice and equal human rights.

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