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Syria's Warring Parties Continue to Use Child Soldiers in 2018

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Introduction

More than seven years have passed since the conflict in Syria began, yet violations against the vulnerable children are still going on. All parties to the conflict have perpetually killed, recruited, and placed many children in combat roles.

Pursuant to the Security Council resolution 2225 of 2015, the UN Secretary-General is to submit inclusive annual reports on children and armed conflicts.¹

This report sheds the light on the number of children recruited or used in forced labor in 2018 by the regime and the opposition. STJ's field researchers met more than 25 witnesses in the regime-held areas, specifically in Hama and northern Homs, and those controlled by the opposition in Idlib and rural Aleppo.

STJ's reported the recruitment of two minor girls within the ranks of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in 2018; Sulaima Abdurrahman Ali, 14, and Aweish Bozan Bozan 16. While the 17-year-old Yamsin Aref reported dead in Deir ez-Zor, from the wounds she sustained while fighting for the Women Protection Units (YPJ) against the Islamic State aka 'ISIL' during the al-Jazeera Storm Campaign.²

Another STJ's report in March 2018 documented the recruitment of the 11-year-old child Aveen Abdullah, aka Aveen Sarokhan, into the ranks of SDF.³

In a report⁴ issued on May 16, 2018, the UN Secretary-General affirmed that there was a large increase in the number of child soldiers compared with the previous years. Concerning Syria and the grave violations conducted against children, the report said:

"Verified cases of the recruitment and use of children increased by 13 per cent compared to 2016, with 961 cases (872 boys, 89 girls) verified. Ninety per cent of the children served in combat roles (861) and 26 per cent (254) were below the age of 15. Of the total number of verified cases, 36 children were of foreign origin and at least 16 were killed in combat."

The report said the verified cases were attributed to ISIL, groups self-affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, People's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ), Government forces and pro-government militias, Ahrar al-Sham, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

¹ "The United Nations Security Council- Resolution 2225 (2015)", June 18, 2015.

[https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2225\(2015\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2225(2015)).

² "Two More Confirmed Cases of Illegal Recruitment of Underage Girls into the SDF Forces", STJ, October 9, 2018, <https://www.stj-sy.com/en/view/945>.

³ "Various Grave Violations Against Syrian Children", STJ, March 14, 2018, <https://www.stj-sy.com/en/view/462>.

⁴ "General Assembly Security Council, Children and armed conflict", May 16, 2018. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/...6D27.../a_72_865_s_2018_465.pdf.

I. The Government's National Defense Forces enlist dozens of children in Hama

The trend of recruitment of child soldiers in Hama started in late 2014 when the Syrian army kept tight grip⁵ on the whole city. Several groups fighting alongside the Syrian army emerged, including the National Defense Forces (NDF), as well as several local committees⁶ tasked with protecting the neighborhoods where anti-government protests took to the streets. Both the NDF and the committees enlisted civilians who had, or had not, performed the mandatory military service, and trained them to use weapons. These pro-government forces were supervised by Syrian military officials or foreign militias such as Hezbollah. The forces, expanded and were proclaimed the Auxiliary Forces or 'al-Quwat al-Radifa'. Many children and adolescents joined them and engaged in various military and non-military tasks.

The NDF established several headquarters in Hama. Other groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Tiger Forces, which is commanded by the Brigadier General Suheil al-Hasan, emerged as well. They directly supported the Syrian army or worked in accordance with security branches.

A media activist reported that the al-A'edeen Camp⁷ in Hama is the place where the scale of recruitment of children proliferated the most, because of the pro-government troops stationed there. The NDF's most use of child soldiers are:

"The Syrian Resistance⁸, Fawj al-Turmah commanded by Haydar al-Na'san, al-Darwish group affiliated to Ahmad Darwish, the Suheil al-Hasan-led Tiger Forces, the 47th Brigade in the Hama Military Airport, in addition to other recruitment centers in the al-Mal'ab neighborhood and other Syrian regime-operated checkpoints in the city center, namely al-Mawqe', Salah al-Din, and al-Hezb", the activist explained.

The children recruited are sent to training camps in the towns of Qamhana and Khattab near Hama where training is limited to the use of the Kalashnikov. After that, the children are sorted to fight in fronts inside or outside Hama based on the military situation, or to the

⁵ In 2012, the Syrian army tightened its grip on Hama. But there were several armed opposition groups in several neighborhoods, including al-Hamidiyah, Bab al-Qebly, al-Jarajmeh, al-Qusour, al-Sheikh Anbar, al-Shir, Masha'i al Arbaeen, Wadi al-Joz, Tariq Halab. In 2014, the Syrian army controlled the whole city after these groups evacuated to areas in Hama.

⁶ In early 2013, committees were established in Hama's neighborhoods, where each one contained a headquarter and volunteers from the same neighborhood. The volunteers carry weapons and security cards and are responsible for policing the neighborhood. All the committees follow the Hama-based security committee. However, in early 2017, the security Committee in Hama dissolved many committees and maintained others. The elements of the dissolved committees joined the National Defense Forces (NDF).

⁷ The camp is near Tariq Halab neighborhood and is inhabited by Palestinian refugees. It becomes one of Hama's neighborhoods and estimated 15,000 people live there.

⁸ The Syrian Resistance is a group formed three years ago to fight alongside the Syrian army. All fighters voluntarily joined it and are organized by Syrian military officials.

battlefields to fight against ISIL. Every child soldier in these forces receives a monthly salary of SYP 75,000.⁹

Ali Taha, leader of the 3rd Unit¹⁰, a large group of the NDF, is known for enlisting children 18s, luring them with benefits and monthly salaries. The poor children are the most vulnerable, the activist added.

Child soldier training camps are established in the majority-Christians cities of Mahardah and Suqaylabiyah in order to increase the number of NDF combatants who defend these areas from any possible offensive.

However, other reasons were listed for voluntarily recruitment, such as financial subsidies, attractive options because when the child wears the military uniform, he feels he is a big man having power. Also, the process of recruitment is so easy since NDF's offices spread across Hama. Apart from the scattered recruitment propaganda, which set no special standards for enlisting. This means that any child who is willing to join the army can just do it without taking the permission of his family. What all the children need to do is to take their ID or the family booklet. Finally, some children feel they must retaliate for their loved ones whom killed while fighting in the Syrian army.

On June 11, 2018, the Facebook page of the NDF center in the pro-government city of Salamiyah posted an announcement for recruitment in its ranks in return for high salaries.



The announcement issued on June 11, 2018 by the NDF center in Salamiyah on recruitment. Photo credit: [the Salamiyah-based NDF center](#).

⁹ Equivalent to \$140.

¹⁰ The 3rd Unit is headed by Mohammed al-Abdullah and Mohammed Mostafa, leader of the Hama-based NDF center.

In June 2015, the same Facebook page¹¹ posted images of child soldiers in a camp in Suqaylabiyah city.



children in a training camp run by the NDF in Suqaylabiyah in Hama. Image taken in 2015.

Photo credit: [the Suqaylabiyah-based NDF center](https://www.facebook.com/National.Defense.in.sqelpyah/posts/400562846804322)

¹¹ The Facebook page of the NDF center in Suqaylabiyah, June 20, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/National.Defense.in.sqelpyah/posts/400562846804322>.

II. At least 80 children recruited in al-A'edeen camp in Hama

The al-A'edeen camp is the poorest neighborhood in Hama with the majority of its households get only SYP 40,000 a month. The dire conditions and lack of job opportunities drives many young men to enlist in the NDF to secure a living.

Abdurrahman. W., a media activist in al-A'edeen camp, recalled to STJ that the trend of recruitment of child soldiers in the camp, proliferated dramatically and is no longer a clandestine work. Since early 2015 until 2018, over 80 children volunteered to become soldiers for SYP 15,000 monthly salary.

Amer. A., is a witness from al-A'edeen camp and a father of a 17-year-old child who enlisted in early 2018 in the ranks of the Liberation Army¹², a group fighting alongside the Syrian army.

Amer recalled:

"My son met some boys who were soldiers in the Liberation Army. He was attracted to their military uniforms and the weapons they carried. I talked to him many times trying to disillusion him, but my advice fell on deaf ears. One day, he went to the recruitment headquarter in al-A'edeen neighborhood and enrolled. Days later, he went to a camp for training. Now, he is at a military checkpoint in Qamhana town. He earns SYP 15,000 a month in addition to some inducements. I talked to an important man in the camp who has links to the Syrian army, asking him to pull some strings and try release of my son, but he said he could not offer any help. Instead he voiced patriotic slogans on the duty of defending the country against terrorists. A duty which does not distinguish between the old and the young, as he claimed. I decided to say nothing more fearful of making troubles".

Ahmad. K., a resident from al-A'edeen camp, testified to STJ that the phenomena of enlisting children has increased recently in the camp due to extreme poverty, adolescence problems and the dropping out of school. Above all, the Liberation Army does not reject enrolling children, instead it encourages them to join the army by offering them benefits. Once the child is recruited, he does not take the permission of his family.

¹² The Liberation Army is a military group whose fighters are of Palestinian refugees in Syria. It is affiliated to the PFLP that fight alongside the Syrian army. al-Sa'eqa Forces is one of its most prominent groups in Hama.

III. Families send their children for recruitment in Hama

The recruitment of child soldiers proliferated in the inner-city slums like al-Sheikh Anber, Masha' Janoub al-Mal'ab, Masha' al-Arbaeen, and at-Tob. Children under 18-year-old were recruited in the Syrian army due to many reasons, such as the benefits provided. Some families even send their children voluntarily.

Zahraa. S. from Hama city said that in early 2018, she saw a propaganda post on the recruitment in the ranks of the NDF in return for SYP 75,000 as a monthly salary. The dire economic conditions they lived in drove her to dial the phone number and enlist her 16-year-old son.

She recalled:

"It was al-Taramih group in Qamhana town near Hama. They asked me to enroll my son in their center in the town and to bring his ID. They promised not to place him on combat roles and that they would send him for a 10-day vacation each two months. They said he would only work as a guard and do some simple tasks. Actually, this what happened, and my son is still a soldier".

Fadi. Kh., a resident of Hama, reported that neediness led one of his relatives to send his 15-year-old child to enlist in the ranks of the Darwish group, which is affiliated to the NDF in Hama.

"The boy Raed had dropped out from school to work in a shop, but his father forced him to recruit to attain financial subsidies. In May 2018, he took his son to an office affiliated to al-Darwish group to enlist him. Soon Raed got a weapon and SYP 50,000 as a monthly salary. The group promised the father they would not take the boy to battlefields, but that was not what happened. Actually, Raed was sent to eastern Hama and was killed in the fight against the armed opposition groups. the father was told that his son was killed by terrorist groups so he himself joined al-Darwish group to retaliate the death of his son".

In July 2018, the 15-year-old child Rami. M., from Hama enlisted in the Syrian Army in the Hama Military Airport to escape the frequent disputes between his parents.

A source from the family reported to STJ:

"The army gave Rami a weapon and provided him a monthly salary. However, days later, they took all the child soldiers, including Rami, to areas in the Salamiyah city to fight against ISIL. Rami was killed and his body was sent back to his family wrapped in the Syrian flag. They didn't allow his mother to farewell him before the burial".

IV. Using children as informers

Children are not only recruited as soldiers, but also as informers. A woman from Hama said to STJ:

"In May 2018, the Syrian security services stormed our home and arrested my husband over accusations of inciting anti-government demonstrations and carrying weapons. Later, we learned that one of my daughter's friends; a child in the primary stage, had spied on him. The girl was recruited by the al-Mawqe' checkpoint in the city center to spy on the persons wanted by the security agents. My husband is still unaccounted for. However, the girl is always seen at the checkpoint of the Syrian Army."

Fadia. H. a witness from Hama, testified to STJ that in April 2018, the Syrian security forces break into their house, searching for concealed weapons. A child, who recruited in Hama, had spied on her.

"They searched every inch of the house for a weapon they were informed we have. I showed them the licensed hunting rifle, the only weapon we have. My son had told his friend about it".

Shadi. M., is a young man who was drafted in the reserve military service in early 2018. Shadi reported to STJ that while he was on duty in Deir ez-Zor province, he saw several children under the age of 18, serving on combat roles despite having little knowledge of weapons. Some of these children were killed in Hama in combats between the Syrian army and the opposition groups. The Syrian forces had promised the children's families not to send them to any battlefields.

A footage¹³, circulated by media agencies on June 22, 2016, showed children volunteered to the ranks of the NDF in Deir ez-Zor.

¹³ "Tahrir Sourî" Facebook page, June 22, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/TahrirSouri/permalink/1091104334289546/>.



A still taken from the previous footage, showing some child soldiers in the ranks of the NDF in Deir ez-Zor province in 2016.

According to STJ's field researchers, some volunteers in the NDF center in Hama were seen attempting to convince some girls under the age of 12 to enlist in the army by offering SYP 40,000 as a monthly salary. About ten other children between 15 and 17 years old were also seen wearing the military uniform in al-Asi square in the middle of Hama. An STJ field researcher asked one of them why they wear military uniforms and quoted him saying: "my friends and I recruited in the Syrian army in Deir ez-Zor and we have been bussed to Hama recently."



A child soldier in the ranks of the NDF in Um al-Hasan park in Hama. Image taken on November 28, 2018. Photo credit: STJ

STJ's filed researchers reported that Hama is a quit stabilized city, with no military operations. Some 19 checkpoints and a public committee are there inside the city to be used for inspection. The number of checkpoints at the city's entrance, including al-Maknena, Sabahi, Jisr al-Mizrab, and al-Bahra, are greater than those within the city. There is also the security military checkpoint on Hama-Homs road.

V. A rise in the number of children enlisted by the pro-government forces in northern rural Homs

The northern rural areas of Homs, especially ar-Rastan city, witnessed a major increase in the recruitment of children, after being handed over to the Government in early May 2018, by

the armed opposition groups under a settlement agreement¹⁴ reached by the two parties. Children are highly receptive to the idea of joining The Syrian Army's offshoots in their area; Tiger forces B/G Suheil al-Hassan, Kairou al-Shoua'aila Group¹⁵ aka 'Khairallah Abdel Bari Group' and al-Qaterji Group¹⁶, for gaining money and power and also to protect their relatives against arbitrary arrest by the regime forces, STJ's field researcher confirmed.

Wael W., born in ar-Rastan city in 2002, was enlisted into the Syrian Air Force Intelligence in rural Homs in September 2018, a relative confirmed to STJ:

"Following his father's arrest by the Syrian Security Forces in 2012, Wael quit school to support his family. He joined the Air Force Intelligence through a man called Khalid Ezz al-Deen. Wael signed a renewable six-month civil contract, under which he would receive S.P 45.000 per month for serving as a picket at the Syrian Army headquarters in the cities of Hama and ar-Rastan."

Poverty has also prompted Abdelkader F., born in ar-Rastan in 2003, to volunteer in the ranks of Kairou al-Shoua'aila Group, a pro-government militia, in June 2018, a relative said. Abdelkader signed a renewable six-month civil contract under which he would be paid a monthly salary of S.P.63.000. He was dispatched to Deir ez-Zor to fight in the frontlines against the Islamic State aka 'ISIL', and to serve as a picket to the warehouses and headquarters of al-Shoua'aila militias there.

Ali A., a child from al-Zaafaranah village born in 2002. He has joined the government's Military Security Forces since October 2018, for fear of possible arrest of him or any of his relatives, and to earn an average monthly salary of S.P. 45.000. Knowing that he is the only son in his family and exempted from **military service**. Ali is used as a guard of the Military Security headquarters in the village and he was tasked with cleaning it up besides being responsible for buying stuffs for those working there.

In another testimony, the child Raed A. born in Talbiseh town in 2002, has joined the Government's Military Security in his town after it was reconciled in May 2018:

"Raed was a child soldier in The al-Tawhid Brigade¹⁷ ranks, which was formed in Talbiseh town. However, after signing of the reconciliation agreement in northern rural Homs, he joined the regime's Military Security forces under a renewable three-month civil

¹⁴ A reconciliation agreement reached between The Syrian forces and their allies and the Negotiation Committee of Northern Homs and Southern Hama. The agreement called for a "full ceasefire, the delivery of heavy weapons, the exit of those who do not wish to settle their situation, and the entry of the Russian military police and the Syrian civilian police after the last convoy leaves northern rural areas."

¹⁵ A pro-government group entered northern rural Homs after being reconciled. It led by Kairou al-Shoua'aila aka 'Khairallah Abdel Bari. The Engineer Battalion and the 47 Brigade in southern Hama, are headquarters of it.

¹⁶ It was formed in early 2018 and led by the member of the People's Council Housam Qaterji. It has close links with the National Defense militia of the Syrian Army. It backed the battlefronts of the Iranian militias in Deir ez-Zor and Daraa. The drivers and fighters affiliated, obtain 'security cards', to protect them from arrest and extortion at the checkpoints, and get a monthly salary ranges between 150 and 300 USD.

¹⁷ A rebel armed group formed in 2016 in ar-Rastan city, northern rural Homs. After the reconciliation, some of its fighters joined the Syrian Army.

contract, for fear of arrest by the government. Raed accompanies the security agents while carrying out searches in the town. He also serves as a picket to a hospital in al-Zaafaranah village, which was turned to a headquarters for the regime's Military Security.", a villager confirmed."

Having become the sole breadwinner following his father's death in a Government shelling on ar-Rastan city, Jamal 15, voluntarily enlisted into the regime's Air Intelligence Forces in rural Homs in July 2018, to protect himself and his family from possible arrests and to get a monthly salary. He was sent to Dara'a to take part in fighting the armed groups there.

Hasan Mahdi al-Darbouli, 17, from rural Homs, was killed fighting for the government forces in Rural Hama. His death was pronounced by the Homs News¹⁸ Facebook page on January 16, 2018.



Hasan Mahdi al-Darbouli. Photo credit: [Homs News Facebook page](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1926182627597582&id=1660393364176511).

¹⁸ Homs News Facebook page, January 16, 2018, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1926182627597582&id=1660393364176511.

VI. 40 schools to raise army of jihadist children in Idlib

In late 2012 and early 2013, the phenomenon of child soldiers arose in the Syria's northern rebel held areas, specifically in Idlib, with the proliferation of Salafist Jihadist groups; such as the Islamic State aka 'Daesh', Al-Nusra Front and Jund al-Aqsa, which established schools throughout Idlib province to educate children as jihadists.

And it increased alarmingly in 2015 with the expansion of Islamist groups' control and the surfacing of new organizations; Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya The Sham Legion The Turkistan Islamic Party.

These schools indoctrinated the children from 10 to 16 years, into Salafism and jihadism, and prepare them to be involved in hostiles later, according to the activist Mohammed B. from Jisr ash-Shugur city who said:

"There are about 40 schools in Idlib, 5 of which are in Jisr ash-Shugur city, which is under The Guardians of Religion Organization's control, and also contains three military training camps. Poverty the illiteracy and ignorance, resulted from the schools' closure due to the armed conflicts in the past few years, are reasons behind child enlistments."

It turned out to the father that his 13-years old son who had been absent from the house for 15 days , joined The Guardians of Religion Organization in western rural Jisr ash-Shugur:

"After a long search I learned that my son is in one of the training camps in rural Jisr ash-Shugur. I went to him instantly and returned him home. Now I rarely let him go out. He recounted that the members of the organization took him to a multi-story building, where he spent ten days with other children. They were given Islamic lessons, and a Holy Quran memorization course by a Sheikh. After those 10 days, they were been taken to a training camp, consisted of a school and dormitories, where they learned the principles of participation and self-reliance. I was very shocked by what my son told me. However, I am currently trying to find a way to smuggle into turkey with my wife and three children, fearing for their future."

Amer M. from rural Damascus, born in 2005, was enlisted into "al-Edad alJihadia" school, affiliated to HTS in late November 2018. After they displaced to northern rural Idlib, his father enlisted him

"When I entered this school, we were told that we became soldiers of HTS. We received religious education courses, included memorization of the Holy Quran, the life and traditions of the Prophet. We were also trained to bear arms and came out in some attacks in rural Lattakia and Hama. Frankly, I initially refused to join this school, but my father encouraged me. Soon I began to like this place, I feel stronger, especially since I

learned to use the rifle. I also feel so proud that I became jihadist. If I killed, I will be rewarded with paradise.”, Amer said.

Bassel M. from Jabal al-Arbaeen area, rural Idlib born in 2002, has been enlisted into the Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya since late 2018, as of date of this report, January 23, 2019:

“In May 2015, the regime forces re-took my village in Jabal al-Arbaeen from the opposition. Unlike me, my family strongly support the Assad which made us be rejected by villagers and made me feel like an outcast from both. Not long ago, I met Abu al-Waleed, a former fighter in Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya. He has newly moved to live near my house with a group of youths. I opened up to him. He advised me to go to the mosque, to attend Islamic lessons and become a jihadist leader. Abu al-Waleed kept hanging around, till the day he offered to join me to his group and give me a rifle to take part in their battles against the regime forces. After much thought, I went to a training camp of the Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya in rural Idlib without my family knowing. When my father found out that and tried to bring me back home, Abu al-Waleed threatened him with arrest for supporting the regime. And frankly, I don’t want to go back home and be an outcast again.”, Bassel recounted.

After her husband’s death in a regime bombardment on Sarja village, southern rural Idlib, Laila A.’s son, Moutaz A. born in 2001, joined The Suqour al-Sham Brigades¹⁹ in early 2017 and was killed fighting for them against the regime forces, in early December 2018.

Few days after Mou’taz’s death, his fellow child soldiers at The Suqour al-Sham Brigades made us a condolence visit, during which they handed Mou’taz’s rifle to my younger son, born in 2004, and convinced him to join their military training camp to avenge his brother and gain a monthly salary. My son is still enlisted in their ranks to this day.

Raghda M., a woman staying in Al Karama refugee camp cluster, near Atme town in rural Idlib province, since her husband’s death in 2017. She told STJ that their dire situation forced her son Omair B., who was born in 2004, to drop out from school and work in an auto repair shop and then to join HTS ranks in early 2017:

“My son introduced to a fighter in the Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), who used to frequent to his work place. The man got close to my son by giving him money and food stuff. Then he talked him into joining his group, luring him with money and the God’s reward for jihad. One day in early 2017, my son didn’t return home after work. I went looking for him. His co-worker told me that he went to an HTS camp to attend a ‘shariah course’ and would return in few days. I appealed to several HTS leaders to help me get my son back,

¹⁹ It was formed in 2011. The number of its fighters is 2000 to 3000. It is active in rural Idlib, specifically in Jabal Zawiya area, Ma’arat al-Nu’man city and Ariha town.

but they said that was not possible, since he became a jihadist. However, Omair came back home after three months. He told me that he joined HTS forces in rural Hama and was fighting on the fronts there. Omair started treating me badly, as a result of the brainwash he got.”, the mother sobbed.



The announcement released by HTS on January 26, 2019, calling children to join its ranks in Idlib.

Photo credit: Telegram.



Child soldiers at the HTS' Ashbal al-Tawheed camp.

Rama A. from Idlib told STJ that her 16-years-old brother joined The Turkistan Islamic Party in February 2018 saying:

"At the beginning of 2018, my brother started going to a mosque, where The Turkistan Islamic Party was calling for jihad, saying that the martyrs will enjoy rich

sensual rewards on reaching paradise including 70 virgins. On February 24, 2018, my brother went, as usual, to that mosque, but he did not return. After a while we learned through his friend that he joined The Turkistan Islamic Party. My father started searching for him in all the camps of this organization, but in vain. However, my brother returned to the house after a month, during which he attended a 'shariah course', as a first stage. My father could bring him around to never return there again, claiming my mother's illness."

VII. The largest child recruitment centers in Idlib

Jihad Callers Center, or 'Duat Al-Jihad', is one of the most well-known child recruitment centers in Idlib. It was established by the Saudi cleric Abdullah al-Muhaysini²⁰ in 2013. It trains the children, under 15, to use weapons and held shariah courses regularly. There are several sharia institutions affiliated to the center including Ibn Taymiyyah, al-Maqdisi, al-Fiqh al-Jihadi and Ashbal al-Farouq camp, which all located in the border areas of northern Syria, near the displacement camps. The center also has a radio, broadcasts in northern Syria named Sada al-Jihad.

Yamen al-Sheikh, a media activist from Idlib province, said to STJ:

"In 2016, Jihad Callers Center, led by Abdullah al-Muhaysini, launched a massive recruitment campaigns called "mobilize" in Idlib province. It was directed mostly to the children, especially those living in displacement camps, because they are easier to lure, since they lack everything; money, good food and comfortable housing. Large numbers of children were enlisted and indoctrinated into Salafism and jihadism, to be sent later to military training camps. As a response, we, activists, launched a counter campaign called 'Children, Not Soldiers' and started an awareness-raising workshops throughout the province of Idlib."

²⁰ Served as a religious judge in the Army of Conquest and HTS.



Announcements for the “mobilize” campaign at the Jihad Callers Center in Idlib province, 2016.
Photo credit: [Children, Not Soldiers campaign’s Facebook page](#).





Children at a military training camp of the Jihad Callers Center in Idlib. image taken in 2016. Photo credit: The Jihad Callers Center.

VIII. Armed groups use child soldiers in rural Aleppo

According to STJ's field researcher, the armed opposition groups²¹ which have been in control of rural Aleppo²² since 2013, including the Liwa Suqour al-Shamal and the The Sham Legion, also used child soldiers, who were lured by the monthly benefits besides the revenge motive they had.

The death of his father by the regime in July 2015, prompted Ayham A., who was born in 2002, and his family to displace from ar-Rastan city towards eastern rural Aleppo. There, he joined the rebel group Liwa Suqour al-Shamal²³ to avenge his father and to make a living. He said:

"After his father's death, Ayham became the main breadwinner of his family. He had no other choice but to volunteer in the Liwa Suqour al-Shamal in May 2018. Ayham assists the fighters by loading and cleaning their weapons, he also prepares their food."

To avenge his arrested father at the regime prisons, the child Ibrahim Kh., who was born in 2002 in Hraytan town, Aleppo province, decided to join The Suqour al-Sham Brigades. He dispatched at one of the group's checkpoints, then he was discharged because of his age, his brother confirmed to STJ.

²¹ Of them are The Sultan Murad Division, Ahrar al-Sharqiya, The Mountain Hawks Brigade and The Sham Legion.

²² Specifically, Afrin, Jarabulus, Azaz and al-Bab.

²³ One of the armed opposition groups controlling eastern and northern rural Aleppo. It is based in Afrin and Jarabulus.

Mohammed Sh. from ar-Rastan city, born in 2001, joined an armed rebel group²⁴ after he had displaced to rural Aleppo in May 2018. The S.P 50.000 monthly salary was what drove him to enlist. During his recruitment, he was given tasks like guarding headquarters and cleaning weapons.

The child Uday M., who was born in Aleppo's Salaheddine District in 2002, recalled to STJ how he volunteered in The Sham Legion Group²⁵:

"My brother was killed during the anti-government protests erupted in Aleppo. I was then 10 years old. The regime's continued bombardments on Aleppo, impelled me to join The Sham Legion rebel groups. At first, I did simple things like food preparation. After a year, I was given the task of cleaning and loading weapons. However, I was discharged after the National Army controlled rural Aleppo because of my age."

²⁴ He concealed the group's name for security reasons.

²⁵ Also known as Homs Legion. It was formed in March 2014, during the Syrian Civil War. The alliance was formed from 19 different groups, some of which were previously affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria in the provinces of Aleppo, Idlib, Homs and Hama. It joined other armed groups, most notably The Levant Front and the Army of Islam, on April 26, 2015, they established the operations room of 'The Fateh of Aleppo' led by Yasser Abdel Rahim.



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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