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SDF shall Demonstrate Full Commitment to Preventing Recruitment of Children Having Signed an Action Plan with UN

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“Jamal Jabou” and three other children were demobilized several days after the action plan was signed; however, many others are yet recruits within SDF’s ranks

On June 29, 2019, the Syrian Democratic Forces/SDF, by an endorsement from the Autonomous Administration in north-eastern Syria, has signed an action plan to end and prevent recruitment of children under the age of 18. Representing the SDF, General Mazloum Abdi, the Force Commander of the SDF, signed and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Ms. Virginia Gamba, signed on behalf of the United Nations/UN at the Palais des Nations, Geneva.¹

Under this plan, SDF is obliged to end and prevent the use and recruitment of children, as well as separate the children currently within its ranks and to put into force preventative, protection and disciplinary measures related to child recruitment and use.

Despite the action plan signed, the SDF has, on July 3, 2019, accepted to recruit Jamal Jalal Jabou, a 15-year-old boy displaced from Afrin city, within its ranks in Ahras district in al-Shahabaa area, northern rural Aleppo, the boy's father recounted to Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ, adding that he appealed to the SDF to let his son go, and the forces did actually demobilize the boy four days from his recruitment – on July 7, 2019.

On September 5, 2018, General Mazloum Abdi, the Force Commander of the SDF, directed an order to the concerned entities constituting the forces, demanding that they prevent the recruitment of children under the age of 18 at all costs and refer any male or female member under this age within their ranks to the concerned entities, namely the Education Committee affiliated with the Autonomous Administration in north-eastern Syria.²

Contradicting the order of the Force's Commander, STJ, in a previous report³ it published in November 2018- two months following the order- has documented that at least two girls under the age of 18 were taken in. The girls, recruited within the ranks of the Women's Protection Units/YPJ, operating under the SDF, are Sulaimah Abdulrahman Ali, 14-year-old, recruited on October 1, 2018, and Awish Bozuan Bouzan, 16-year-old, recruited on October 8, 2019. STJ has also documented the death of another 17-year-old girl, called Yasmin A'aref, who joined the ranks of the Forces at a previous date. In another report⁴ it published in March 2018, STJ has additionally documented the recruitment of the 11-year-old girl Avin Abdullah, nicknamed 'Avin Sarukhan'.

On a similar note, STJ came by information reporting that the SDF has demobilized both Sulaimah Abdulrahman Ali and Awish Bozuan Bouzan, responding to their parents' petitions,

¹ "To Protect Children... The Syrian Democratic Forces Sign A Joint Action Plan With The United Nations In Geneva", SDF Press. July 2, 2019. Last visited: July 13, 2019. <http://sdf-press.com/en/2019/07/to-protect-children-the-syrian-democratic-forces-sign-a-joint-action-plan-with-the-united-nations-in-geneva/>.

² "Important Military Order by Commander of SDF", SDF Press. September 7, 2018. Last visited: July 12, 2019. <https://sdf-press.com/2018/09/%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%82%d8%a7%d8%a6%d8%af-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b9%d8%a7%d9%85-%d9%84%d9%80%d9%82%d8%b3%d8%af-%d9%8a%d8%b5%d8%af%d8%b1-%d8%a3%d9%85%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%8b-%d8%b9%d8%b3%d9%83%d8%b1%d9%8a%d9%91%d8%a7>.

³ "Two More Confirmed Cases of Illegal Recruitment of Underage Girls into the SDF Forces", STJ. November 9, 2018. Last visited: July 13, 2019. <https://stj-sy.org/en/944/>.

⁴ "Various Grave Violations Against Syrian Children", STJ. March 14, 2018. Last visited: July 13, 2019. <https://stj-sy.org/en/461/>.

who pleaded for their yet minor girls. On March 19, 2019, the SDF returned Sulaimah Abdulrahman Ali, aged 14, to her parents in al-Hasakah after being recruited for 180 days within the ranks of the YPJ. Early in May 2019, Awish Bozuan Bouzan, aged 16, was also taken back home to her parents, based in Kobani/ Ayn al-Arab, leaving behind her the YPJ, within the ranks of which she served for seven months.

According to STJ's field researcher, the constituents of the SDF, the Women's Protection Units/YPJ and the People's Protection Units/YPG in specific terms, did not entirely refrain from recruiting children under the age of 18 throughout north-eastern Syria since 2014 to the onset of July 2019, notwithstanding the agreement they sealed with the Geneva Call in July 2014 on the one hand, or with the UN late in June 2019 on the other.

However, SDF has demobilized three minor children in addition to the 15-year-old boy Jamal Jabou in northern rural Aleppo early in July 2019, several days after the action plan was signed with the UN. STJ failed to identify the three demobilized children, while many others, under the age of 18, are still recruits within the ranks of the Forces to the time this report was written – July 12, 2019. Of the yet recruits is the girl Khalisah Mustafa Darwish, aged 16, who has been taken in by the YPJ, operating in the al-Hasakah-affiliated city of Ras al-Ayn/ Sari Kani, in mid-May 2018, and the girl Silva Issa Hamou, aged 16, who was recruited early in 2015 by the same Forces, operating in the same city.

The Details of the Child Jamal Jalal Jabou's Recruitment and His Demobilization only Four Days later:

On July 3, 2019, the YPG, operating under the SDF, recruited the 15-year-old boy Jamal Jalal Jabou, displaced from the city of Afrin, within its ranks in the Ahras district in al-Shahbaa area, northern rural Aleppo, reported the boy's father, Jalal Jabou, who is based outside Syria, considering the recruitment of his minor son, who lives with his grandfather, by the YPG a violation of the child's right to life. On July 5, 2019, he commented on the incident, telling STJ the following:

"On that day, my eldest son, Jamal, unlike himself did not show up at home, where he has been living with my father for about a year, along with his younger brother Mustafa, 11-year-old, my mother and sister in the village of Tell Qarah, administratively affiliated with the Ahras district in northern rural Aleppo. As time dragged on, passing 10 p.m., my father started searching for him and asking for his whereabouts. Jamal's friends told him that he joined the YPG. Searching more into the matter; questioning a lot; we confirmed that he was at a YPG-affiliated center in Ahras district, in a post called 'Haiza Nu', which means the 'New Force'. My father went there immediately to get my son back. They admitted having him. My father presented them my family register to assure them that my son was a minor but to no avail, for they refused to let my father see his grandson or even take him back home, saying that they will allow him back soon."



The personal data of the boy Jamal Jalal Jabou as shown by the family register, which proves that Jamal was born in 2004. Taken on: July 5, 2019. Photo credit: STJ.

The boy's father, Jalal Jabou, is from the Sharran district, Afrin city, where he continued to live until the conflict in Syria broke out, forcing him to leave the country in search of work. In Syria, in the same district, he left his two sons, Jamal and Mustafa, in the care of his father Jamal Jabou and his mother, given that his wife and himself got divorced two years ago. The family, however, was coerced to leave the area, displaced to the village of Tell Qarah, Ahras district, following the start of the military operation launched by the Turkish forces and their allied opposition armed groups on the Syrian Kurdish majority city of Afrin, which the YPG held early in 2018. The operation ended on March 18, 2018, with the Turkish army and the armed groups that accompanied it taking over the Afrin city's center.⁵

⁵ "Syria: Turkey must stop serious violations by allied groups and its own forces in Afrin", Amnesty International. August 2, 2018. Last visited: July 13, 2019. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/syria-turkey-must-stop-serious-violations-by-allied-groups-and-its-own-forces-in-afrin/>.

Jalal Jabou noted that his son Jamal, who attended school until the middle stage and who works for a barbershop in Ahras district, has attempted to join the ranks of the YPG at an earlier date. Back then, his grandfather managed to bring him back home. He added:

“This is the second time that the YPG, operating under the SDF, recruits my son Jamal within its ranks, for early in July 2019, my son joined the Forces for the first time, but my father was fast to know and succeeded in getting him back on the same day, after he notified the YPG that the child is a minor and leaders of the SDF interfered and ordered the demobilization of my son. On the second time, however, we have filed complaints to several YPG and SDF centers and commanders to get my son back, who to the moment cannot understand that he should not join any military force, being underage.”

Appealing to the SDF, the Force returned the boy to his family four days later, on July 7, 2019, in particular, as Jalal Jabou recounted to STJ on the same day of his son’s return:

“On July 7, 2019, around 9 a.m., three men visited my father, Jalal Jabou, at his house in Tell Qarah, Ahras district, introducing themselves as members of the Autonomous Administration-affiliated human rights committee. They told him that they will return my 15-year-old boy home, for he is a minor, committing themselves to the action plan that the SDF signed with the UN. They also demanded that my father inform me to stop spreading the news of my son’s kidnapping on the social networking sites and talking to media outlets about it, but he told them that we will not stop making a fuss about the issue until my minor son is demobilized and brought back home again. They actually did return him. On 6:30 p.m. a black car boarded by SDF commanders, stopped at my father’s house and handed him my son Jamal, saying that they demobilized him for being a minor, against his wishes to join them.”

The witness concluded his account saying:

“They demobilized my minor son Jamal Jabou four days into his recruitment. He told me that he stayed at the ‘Haiza Nu’ or the ‘New Force’ post in Ahras district, for the first two days while he was transferred to a YPG training center in Aleppo city for the next two days before he was demobilized and brought back to his grandfather’s house.”



The 15-year-old Jamal Jalal Jabou to the right of the photo, along with his grandfather and younger brother, moments after his demobilization by the SDF and return home. Taken on: July 7, 2019.

Photo credit: The boy's father Jalal Jabou.

Recommendations:

To the authorities of the Autonomous Administration in north-eastern Syria and the Syrian Democratic Forces/SDF:

1. The authorities of the Autonomous Administration in north-eastern Syria and the SDF have to fully and transparently commit themselves to the agreements they sealed with the Geneva Call in July 2014 and the UN late in June 2019, on preventing the recruitment of children and using them in military operations.
2. The authorities of the Autonomous Administration in north-eastern Syria and the SDF have to demobilize the recruited children immediately and reunite them with their relatives or transfer them to the civil authorities, which are to protect them if they were liable to domestic violence when returned to their families, including the girl Khalisah Mustafa Darwish, aged 16, and the girl Silva Issa Hamou, aged 16, who are yet recruits within their ranks to the moment, along with the many other child recruits.
3. The authorities of the Autonomous Administration in north-eastern Syria and the SDF have to assign secretariats and grievance committees to receive complaints filed against the recruitment of children and set harsh punitive measures against the commanders not complying with the ban on the recruitment of children.



History

Syrians for Truth and Justice was conceived during the participation of its co-founder in the Middle-East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program, who was driven by a will to contribute to Syria's future. Starting as a humble project to tell the stories of Syrians experiencing enforced disappearances and torture, it grew into an established organisation committed to unveiling human rights violations of all sorts.

Convinced that the diversity that has historically defined Syria is a wealth, our team of researchers and volunteers works with dedication at uncovering human rights violations committed in Syria, in order to promote inclusiveness and ensure that all Syrians are represented, and their rights fulfilled.

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