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**“Child Recruitment” by Parties
to Conflict in Syria, a Lasting
Phenomenon**

“Child Recruitment” by Parties to Conflict in Syria, a Lasting Phenomenon

A special report documenting new cases of child recruitment by the SDF and the armed groups of the Syrian opposition, the Syrian government, as well as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham/HTS

Executive Summary

More than nine years into the start of the protests / conflict in Syria, violations of the rights of children continue to be committed— whether killing and subjecting them to violence in detention centers or recruitment and repeatedly using them in military operations by all parties to the conflict throughout Syria, though the numbers of recruits vary from one party to another.

Seeking to document human rights violations, Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ obtained information and testimonies covering new cases of child recruitment in different Syrian regions.

Of the cases recorded by STJ’s field researchers, at least (6) children were taken into the ranks of the Syrian Democratic Forces/SDF, operating in Northeastern Syria. These cases indicate that the SDF has not yet demonstrated full commitment to preventing the recruitment of children, though it had signed an action plan providing for ending and preventing the recruitment of children under the age of 18 on June 29, 2019, at the United Nations Headquarters in Geneva. However, STJ had also documented SDF’s demobilization of three children, while three others were still recruited within its ranks when this report was prepared, namely in mid-April 2020.

On the same note, STJ registered a rise in child recruitment in the area of Ras al-Ayn / Sari Kani, al-Hasakah province, one month after the *offensive Peace Spring* was launched against the SDF by Turkey, with the support of the Syrian National Army/SNA of the Syrian Interim Government / the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces in October 2019. In the area, at least three cases of child recruitment were documented, carried out between late 2019 and early 2020 by the armed groups of Ahrar al-Sharqiya/ Rebels of the Eastern Area and Sultan Murad Brigade. The children continue to be recruited to the day.

Speaking of the areas outside the Syrian government’s control, particularly in Idlib province, Northwestern Syria, STJ's field researchers reported that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham/HTS had recruited dozens, if not hundreds, of children under the age of 18. To do so, HTS started several recruitment campaigns, in conjunction with the military operations that the Syrian regular forces and their allies carried out against it in Idlib in late 2019 and early 2020. Of the many campaigns, two were the most effective, “Jahid be-Nafsak/Invest Yourself in the Strife” and “Infiro Khifafan wa-Thikalan/Go Forth, whether Light or Heavy”, which primarily targeted residents of IDP camps near the Turkish-Syrian border strip, especially children, luring them with money and the idea of Jihad/holy strife for the cause of God.

In areas held by the Syrian government and its loyalist militias also, child recruitment never stopped, particularly in the city of Damascus and its countryside. There, STJ’s researchers monitored the National Defense Forces’ persistence on enlisting children, in addition to the Iranian militias backing them, for they both had used children in military operations.

In reports published in 2019 and 2018, STJ documented the stories of a number of children who have been enlisted by all parties to the conflict in Syria, including the SDF, which recruited

two minor girls within the ranks of its affiliated Women's Protection Units/YPJ. The recruits are Sulaima Abdulrahman Ali, 14, and Awish Bouzan Bouzan, 16, who were later demobilized. A third girl, Yasmeen Aref, 17, however, was killed after joining the forces.¹ Jamal Jalal Jabou, 15, from Afrin, was recruited by SDF in 2019 and was discharged later.² STJ's reports, moreover, document the recruitment of several children by HTS and the Syrian government's National Defense Forces.³

Report Methodology

This report is based on a total of (14) testimonies and interviews, including six that STJ had conducted with parents of children, whom SDF had enlisted in Northeastern Syria.

STJ's field researcher had also obtained the testimony of the parents whose three children were recruited by the Turkey-backed SNA, affiliated with the Syrian Interim Government / the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces in the area of Ras Al-Ayn/Sari Knai after the *operation Peace Spring* was started by the Turkish forces and the SNA's armed groups there. In addition to the parents' account of the incident, the testimony of a media activist, based in the region, is included in the report.

This report records the stories of two children, who got recruited within the ranks of the HTS in Idlib Province, told by their parents.

Furthermore, the report documents the details of the recruitment of two other children, who were forced to join a militia known for its loyalty to the Syrian government in Damascus and its countryside— namely the National Defense Forces, and to Iranian militias, as well.

These witnesses were interviewed by STJ's field researchers between January and late March 2020, given that some were met in person, while others were contacted via the Internet.

Additional to the above listed interviews, STJ had relied on several open sources (articles - videos – photos, etc.), as to crosscheck the information and attain evidence of the cases documented in the report.

¹ “Two More Confirmed Cases of Illegal Recruitment of Underage Girls into the SDF Forces,” STJ, November 9, 2018. Last visited: April 30, 2020. <https://stj-sy.org/en/944/>.

² “SDF shall Demonstrate Full Commitment to Preventing Recruitment of Children Having Signed an Action Plan with UN,” STJ, July 9, 2019. Last visited: April 30, 2019. <https://stj-sy.org/en/sdf-shall-demonstrate-full-commitment-to-preventing-recruitment-of-children-having-signed-an-action-plan-with-un/>.

³ “Various Grave Violations Against Syrian Children,” STJ, March 14, 2018. Last visited: April 30, 2020. <https://stj-sy.org/en/461/>.

1. Six Children at Least were Recently Recruited by the SDF:

Operating in Northeastern Syria, the SDF has not yet shown full commitment to preventing child recruitment, even though, given the blessings of the Autonomous Administration, it had signed an action plan to end and prevent enlistment of children under the age of 18, at the United Nations Headquarters in Geneva, on June 29, 2019. Under this plan, the SDF was supposed to commit itself to fully end and prevent recruitment and deployment of children, as well as to discharging those already fighting within its ranks. The SDF had also to take preventive and disciplinary measures regarding the recruitment and use of children.⁴

Displaying little adherence to the action plan, the SDF had in late 2019 and early 2020 taken six children at least into its ranks in the Sheikh Maqsoud Neighborhood in Aleppo and the al-Shahba area in northern rural Aleppo. Among the recruits were teenage boys Hassan, 16, S. Issa, 16, and R. Othman 16. At different intervals in 2020, the children were discharged, after their parents made a media appeal, demanding that the SDF demobilizes their minor children.

For their part, the underage girls Aisha Mohammad, 15, Yasmeen Rashid, 14, and Sultana Bakr, 16, were yet held as recruits under the SDF when this report was being prepared, mid-April 2020. It is worth mentioning that the girls' status continues to be thus despite their relatives' constant plea for the SDF to let them go, who provided STJ with these details.

A. Details on Child Recruitment within SDF Ranks

On December 12, 2019, the Women's Protection Units/YPJ, operating under the SDF, accepted S. Issa's application to join its forces. Displaced from the city of Afrin, Issa, 16, was taken into the YPJ's ranks in al-Shahba area in northern rural Aleppo. Abdo Issa, the girl's uncle, 46, who is currently based in the Lebanese capital, Beirut, confirmed his niece's recruitment, considering the YPJ's enlistment of an underage girl, who lives with her mother in the camps of al-Shahba, a violation of children's right to life. On January 15, 2020, he spoke to STJ:

"On that day, December 12, 2019, my niece disappeared from the camp. When her mother started investigating into the matter, the camp administration's staff, who are affiliated to the Autonomous Administration, told her that they had sent her with other children to participate in a 15-day-training. However, when the period was done, the girl did not show up. Late 2019, she called, saying that she had fled one of the YPJ's camps that recruited her. She added that she attempted escape, but all her efforts were to no avail for the forces have located and arrested her."

⁴ "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: April 30, 2020. <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/>.



Photo No. (1): On the right, is an image showing the personal details of the minor girl S. Issa. It is a copy of a civil registration document, issued by the Syrian government, which proves that the girl was born in 2004. Photo No. (2): On the left, is a photo of S. Issa. Obtained on: January 15, 2020. Credit: The witness Abdo Issa.

An orphan, S. is originally from Afrin city. Her father, Nidal Issa, was a fighter of the Asayish/Internal Security Forces, operating under the Autonomous Administration. He died in a car accident in July 2016. In Early 2018, the family was forced to abandon the area, heading to the camps in al-Shahab, triggered by the military operation that Turkey embarked on, backed by affiliated armed opposition groups, against the Kurdish majority city of Afrin, which back then was controlled by the People’s Protection Units/YPG. The offensive ended on March 18, 2018, with Turkey and the complicit armed group having taken over the center of Afrin city.

The attempts of the girl’s family to bring her back home all failed, though they repeatedly called upon the SDF to discharge her. Consequently, they took to media, pleading with the forces to demobilize their minor girl. The attempt actually worked, for the SDF was coerced into releasing the girl and refuting the rumors that surrounded her recruitment, according to Abdo Issa:

“S.’s mother spared no effort to get her daughter back, but she was always disappointed. No one gave heed to her calls, so we sought to evoke the public. We provided media outlets and human rights organizations with statements addressing

this violation. We aimed to pressure the SDF. The move paid off, as the SDF was forced to demobilize the girl and return her to her family again, on January 4, 2020, less than a month into her drafting. The girl, however, had to appear in a video,⁵ in which she refuted being kidnapped and recruited by the Autonomous Administration."



Photo no. (3): Taken from [the above-mentioned video](#), it shows S. Issa denying being kidnapped and enlisted by the Autonomous Administration.

Investigating into a second case, STJ’s field researcher verified that the SDF had on December 16, 2019 recruited the teenage boy A. Hassan, 16, from the village of Trmisha, in the Şiyê district / Sheikh al-Hadid, rural Afrin, within the ranks of its forces in the al-Shahba area. Nonetheless, A. was demobilized on January 6, 2020, less than a month after his recruitment, which was the result of his family’s efforts, based in the camps of al-Shahba area. The family, reporting to STJ, said that they appealed for their boys release because he is still a minor.

⁵ For further details, refer to the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/efrinviolations/videos/vb.1343386779141505/482628065985719/?type=2&theater>.



Photo No. (4): presents the personal details of the teenager A. Hassan, as documented in the family register, proving that the child was born in 2004. Obtained on: January 15, 2020. Photo credit: local activists.

Covering a third case, STJ's field researcher recorded that the SDF had demobilized R. Othman, 16, from the village of Adama, in the Rajo District, rural Afrin. In early 2020, several days into her recruitment into the ranks of the SDF in Sheikh Maqsoud, where the forces operate in Aleppo city, the teenager was discharged after her parents implored to SDF that their daughter is yet a minor.



Photo No. (5): shows the teenager girl R. Othman, born in 2004. Obtained on: January 15, 2020. Photo credit: local activists.

The SDF, nonetheless, was still holding Yasmeen Rashid, 14, as a recruit when this report was being made, on March 31, 2020. Yasmeen, an orphan, from the Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood in the city of Aleppo, was drafted on November 27, 2019. The SDF ignored the appeal of the teenage girl's mother, who demanded that the forces demobilize her daughter who is yet a minor. The mother Laila Koto, 43, narrated the following to STJ:

"On that day, my daughter went out to visit a friend and did not return. Soon, I learned that the Women's Protection Units had recruited her. I referred to all the military centers of the Autonomous Administration to retrieve my daughter, but they refused to let her go. They said: 'She came of her own free will. So, we will not return her'. I did all I could to persuade them, but all my efforts failed. I even threatened them to set fire to my body if they do not give me back my daughter. Still, they did not respond."

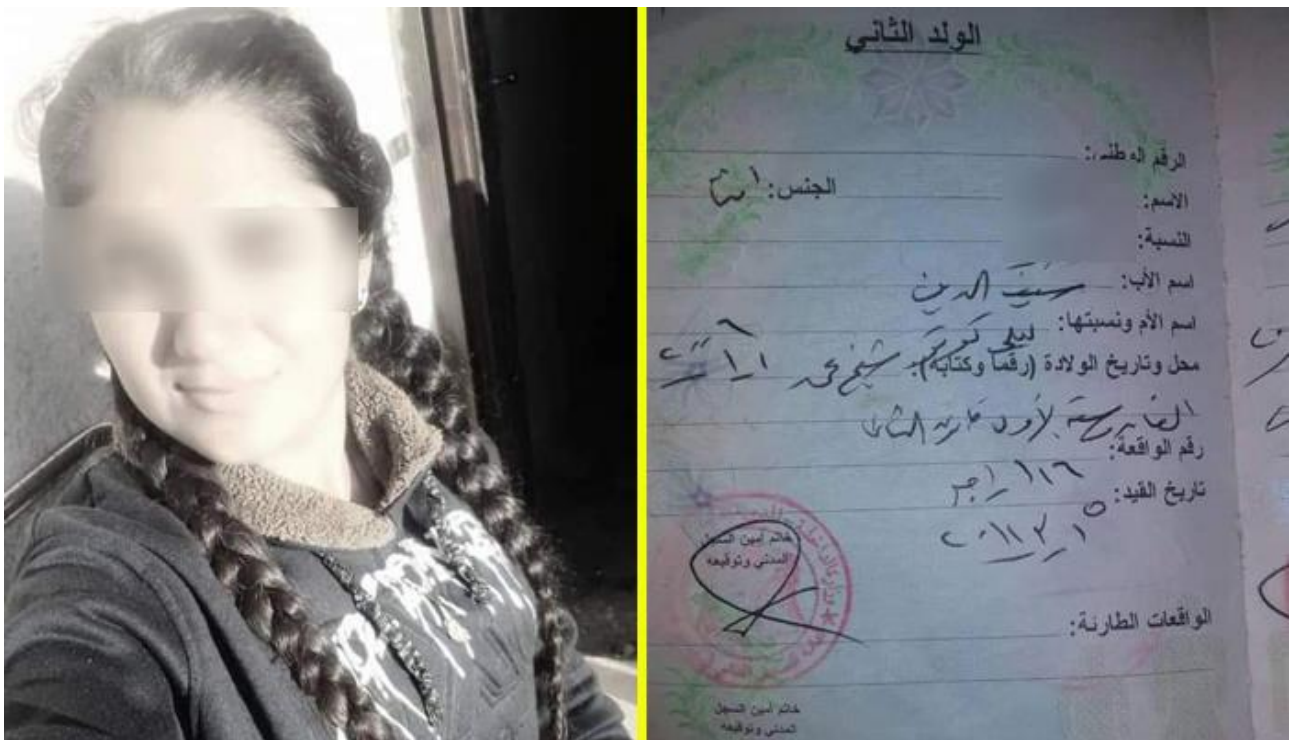


Photo No. (6): To the right, is a copy of Yasmeen's personal details, as included in the family register. It proves that she was born in 2006. Photo No. (7): To the left, is a photo of Yasmeen Rashid. Obtained on: January 15, 2020. Credit: the witness Laila Koto.

Sultana Bakr, 16, from the town of Şiyê district / Sheikh al-Hadid in rural Afrin, had a similar fate. Living with her family in the village of Ma'arat al-Musalamiyeh, al-Shahba rea in northern rural Aleppo, Sultana was enlisted by the SDF on January 7, 2020. As her relatives' efforts to free her, being a minor, were all doomed to fail, Sultana was yet kept as a recruit within SDF's ranks to the date this report was written, on March 31, 2020.

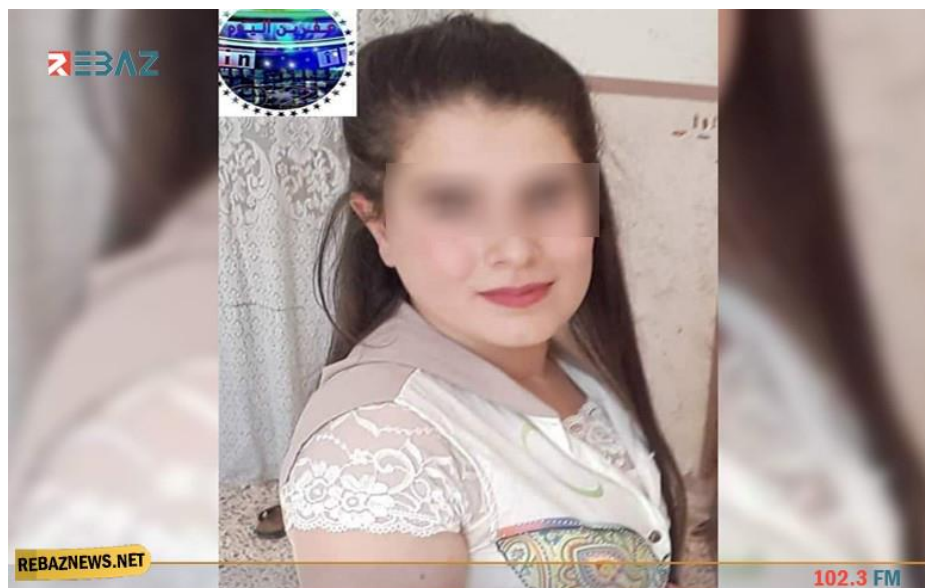


Photo No. (8): shows the girl, Sultana Bakr, born in 2004. Obtained on: January 15, 2020. Credit: Rebaz News.

Recruited on February 23, 2019, Aisha Ibrahim, 15, has also been held by the SDF to the date this report was prepared, on March 31, 2020. Her family appealed to the YPJ in Tal Rifaat, northern Aleppo, to demobilize their daughter, who was enlisted less than a year after the family fled from the city of Afrin triggered by the *offensive Peace Spring*.

Aisha was not the only family member to get recruited, for the YPJ had also recruited her sister Amina Ibrahim in Afrin in 2013, when she was 13 years old. Commenting on this, a member of the family, which is today based in Aleppo city, told STJ:

“Aisha’s father, Mohammad Ibrahim, had a heart attack after his daughter was recruited by the Women’s Protection Units. He grieved over her absence, especially since his other daughter, Amina, was previously recruited by the same group. The father, today, is confined to a wheelchair and suffers heart-related issues.”

He added:

“For more than a year, Mazikin Hasso, Aisha’s mother, has been approaching the SDF centers and camps in search of her daughter, seeking those established in Aleppo and al-Shahba. She also provided several officials of the SDF with documents proving that her daughter is a minor, but none of her efforts seemed to pay so far. The SDF is refusing to demobilize Aisha, on the pretext that she applied to join its ranks and that she did so on her own free will.”

It is the second time that the YPJ recruits Aisha, the source explained, as it had previously enlisted her in the city of Afrin in the second half of 2017. Back then, however, she was discharged less than a month into her recruitment, succumbing to the demands of her parents, who reported that she is a minor.



Picture No. (9): shows the personal details of the minor girl Aisha Mohammad Ibrahim, which are included in the family register, indicating that she was born in 2005. Credit: Aisha’s family.

2. Children Recruited by Turkey-backed SNA:

The factions of the Syrian National Army/SNA, which Turkey backs, while affiliated to the Syrian Interim Government / The National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, have also recruited children within their ranks in Ras al-Ayn / Sari Kani area, after the *offensive Peace Spring* was launched against the SDF in December 2019 by Turkish forces with the support of the SNA. In the after math of the offensive, Ankara and its allies controlled wide border area in northeastern Syria, about 120 km, extending between the cities of Ras Al-Ayn / Sari Kani, north of al-Hasakah, and Tel Abyad, north of Raqqa. Child recruitment emerged in Ras Al-Ayn / Sari Kani area before the SNA’s factions held reigns to power there, specifically in November 2019, which is less than a month before these factions managed to take it over. Recruitments, nonetheless, mounted in time, according to a Ras al-Ayn / Sari Kani-based media activist. He told STJ:

“The families of recruited children barely dare to demand the armed factions to demobilize their minor children. They fear the factions’ behavior and practices. The reasons, however, that pushed the children into their ranks are either financial, for the area provides almost no job opportunities following the *operation Peace Spring*, or related to protecting their families from the oppression of the armed groups, and the violations they commit, including killing, arrest, torture, thefts, etc. They might even do it to gain influence and authority, which is to help them achieve certain goals.”

Several sources reported that the Sultan Murad Brigade, the Hamza Brigade / al-Hamzat and the Ahrar Sharqiya/Rebels of the Eastern Area are responsible for most cases of child recruitment in Ras Al-Ayn / Sari Kani. Furthermore, the recruitment cases, which are carried out by the factions of the SNA, in Ras al-Ayn/ Sari Kani are way beyond the cases registered in the city.

In this regard, STJ's field researcher recorded that the Tukey-backed armed groups of SNA, including Ahrar Sharqiya/Rebels of the Eastern Area and the Sultan Murad Brigade, have recruited three children at least within their ranks. The children were yet captives when this report was prepared, namely on March 31, 2020. The recruitments took place mostly in the town of Tal Halaf, 5 km southwest of Ras Al-Ayn / Sari Kani, according to the testimonies of the recruited children's parents, who refused to reveal their names concerned for their safety.

Firas M., 15, from the town of Tal Halaf, was one of the children enlisted by the Sultan Murad Brigade in the city of Ras al-Ayn / Sari Kani in January 2020, ignoring the pleas of his parents, who demanded that their son be released being he a minor.

According to the child's mother, 45, the fighters of the Sultan Murad Brigade have refused to discharge her son, ignoring her demands. She narrated the following to STJ:

"I live with my husband and children in the Zardasht neighborhood in Ras al-Ayn / Sari Kani. We returned home when the military operation was over, only to find that the fighters have been living in most of the neighborhood's homes, after they turned a number of them into military posts. Shortly after, they recruited my son. I demanded that they demobilize him, since he is a minor. I gave them the family register which proves that he is still so young. However, they did not listen, mocked me and left. I do not know where they took him to the day."

The witness' attempts to recover her son all failed, though she had filed an official complaint at the Military Police's center in Ras al-Ayn / Sari Kani. She added:

"I filed a complaint at the military police's center, asking them to give me my son back, because he is a minor. The center was receiving many various complaints. They told me that they would hold the Sultan Murad Brigade accountable and force it to demobilize my son, but that did not happen. On the contrary, the faction's militants fired me. They did not even allow me to see my son, who they transferred to one of their training centers, according to the latest information that we were able to obtain. I am still waiting for my son's return."

Abbass M., 16, from Tal Halaf town, is a second child who had been recruited by the Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Rebels of the Eastern Area in late 2019 to the day this report was prepared, on March 31, 2020. The child's father spoke to STJ, saying that he is fully aware that enlisting his son is against the rights of the child. Nonetheless, he does not dare demand the demobilization of his son. He said:

“My son was absent for several hours. Then, a militant of the armed group told me that he was with them. They persuaded him to join their ranks, handing him a weapon despite his young age. I saw him once, boarding one of their military vehicles, but I did not dare to demand his return, because the armed group’s fighters are extremists and had committed many violations in the area. I am sacred that they might take revenge on me or my family if I opposed them or attempted to challenge their will.”

The witness added that he asked one of the leaders of the Rebels of the Eastern Area to allow him see his son, just to gain some reassurance. The leader, however, refused to grant him this chance. He also informed him that the child became a fighter within the ranks of the SNA, and that his duty dictated that he joins "jihad", as well as fighting alongside Turkey and the rest of the opposition factions that Ankara backs.

Abdullah H., 16, is the third child recruited by the Ahrar al-Sharqiya in the town of Tal Half in November 2019. He was still a recruit when this report was prepared on March 31, 2020. The child’s relatives narrated this to STJ, but they refrained from providing further details, fearing the fighters of the SNA’s factions.

On its official Telegram account, the Waqas Brigade, another faction of the SNA, published pictures of a number of fighters, saying that they died during the *operation Peace Spring* in October 2019. Among the dead fighters were Ammar Ratib al-Lakah, born in rural Damascus-Duma 2001, and Abdelmuneim Khalid al-Abdallah, born in the city of Aleppo - Marea 2001. The birth dates of Ammar and Abdelmuneim indicate that they joined the ranks of this brigade before they reached the age of majority, 18, especially since joining the faction stipulates that the recruits attend a training camp that may last for months.



Photo no. (10) – shows Ammar al-Lakah, born in 2001, who supposedly died in the village of al-Twias. Credit: Al-Waqas Brigade’s Telegram account.



Photo no. (11) – shows Abdelmuneim Khalid al-Abdallah, born in 2001, who supposedly died in the village of al-Twas. Credit: Al-Waqaq Brigade’s Telegram account.

Additionally, STJ, in a report prepared in March 2020 (to be published in May), documented that the Turkey-backed factions of the SNA had recruited children from northern rural Aleppo, who were displaced / or choose to settle there, coming from other provinces. These children will be transferred to the fronts in Libya, in exchange for monthly sums of money. In February 2020, a fighter mobilized to Tripoli – Libya, confirmed this information, adding:

“Within my division, I saw five children at least. It was clear that they are under the age of 18, both their physical appearances and inability to use arms proved it. It is also important to mention, that they were assigned different tasks.”

Commenting on this, a civilian from Marea said:

“I saw a commander of the Mutasim Armed Group with four children in one of the city’s stores. He was talking to them about the situation in Libya and that they are heroes, adding that they will be providing for their families. Asking the children about their ability to use arms, they told me that they will be taught at a training camp that the Mutasim armed group would start before sending them to Libya.”

Through the report, STJ stressed that the opposition-affiliated SNA is recruiting children, as it is using or allowing children and their parents to use identification documents without verifying their authenticity or the authority that issued them. The SNA accepts to draft a

person holding an identification / identity card, whether issued by the Syrian government or by the Civil Registry, which Turkey runs in the Euphrates Shield and the Olive Branch areas. The risk, however, posed by these cards or identification documents is that their data are easily faked or manipulated, especially the age / birth date. The field researchers have confirmed that a fake ID can be simply obtained in the city of Azaz, for instance, in return for of 10 000 Syrian Pounds only.

The testimony of a Civil Registry employee in the city of Marea confirms this. He affirmed that there are no procedures or methods for verifying the information and data that the person provides while applying for an ID.⁶

3. Child Recruitment Campaigns Launched by HTS and other Jihadist Groups:

In areas outside the Syrian government’s control, in Idlib province particularly, the phenomenon of child recruitment has been mounting with the spread of Islamist factions and the increase of their popularity in 2012 and 2013. The most prominent of these factions is Hayat Tahrir al-Sham/HTS, which was established in early 2017 and took over most of Idlib province later on.

With the start of the military campaign that the Syrian regular forces and allies launched against Idlib province in May 2019, HTS, along with its affiliated or close armed groups, has embarked on a number of campaigns in northwestern Syria, covering Idlib, rural Aleppo and rural Hama. The campaigns seek to urge people to fight, including children. The key of these campaigns was perhaps the “Infiro Khifafan wa-Thikalan/Go Forth, whether Light or Heavy”, which corresponded to the onset of 2020. This campaign was conducted under the supervision of the General Shura Council, an institution affiliated to HTS and the legislative umbrella of the Salvation Government. The campaign’s activities, however, varied, including distribution of flyers and holding events, especially in public places, such as mosques, while it mainly targeted camp residents.

Several HTS-affiliated entities have organized similar campaigns, among which are the General Shura Council and the Ministry of Endowments of the Salvation Government. These two entities launched “Jahid be-Nafsak/Invest Yourself in the Strife” campaign in late 2019 that also aimed at encouraging people to fight, including children, by alluring them with money at times, and by the promise of paradise at others. According to media activists, these campaigns have tempted many children to enlist, as they offered them money, in addition to other incentives such as food baskets, housing or paying their rents. The poor financial conditions of many children might perhaps be the reason why they accepted to be recruits.

⁶ “Syria: Turkish Identification Cards Obliterate Identity of Natives and Displaced populations Alike,” STJ on October 21, 2019. Last visited: April 30, 2020. <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-turkish-identification-cards-obliterate-identity-of-natives-and-displaced-populations-alike/>.

In this regard, a video posted by *Ibaa News Agency*,⁷ known for its affiliation to HTS, captures one event within the “Jahid be-Nafsak/Invest Yourself in the Strife” campaign in September 2019, which HTS organized to attract recruits. The video clearly shows that among the attendees were several children.



'اجاهد بنفسك' حملة جديدة للدفاع عن المحرر

Photo (12): taken from the [above-mentioned video](#), it shows one of the events held under the HTS-launched “Jahid be-Nafsak/Invest Yourself in the Strife” Campaign.

Another video, posted by *Ibaa* in January 2020,⁸ shows an event under HTS’ campaign “Infiro Khifafan wa-Thikalan/Go forth, whether Light or Heavy”, during which a number of children were enlisted.



حملة "انفروا خفافا وثقالا" تتابع نشاطها باستنفار الشباب في مخيمات اطمه شمال ادلب

Photo (13): taken from the [above-mentioned video](#), it shows a number of children, recruited under the HTS-launched “Infiro Khifafan wa-Thikalan/Go forth, whether Light and Heavy”.

⁷ For further details, refer to the following link: <https://videos.ebaa.news/watch/LlaFcl3yC1uusxu>.

⁸ For further details, refer to the following link: <https://videos.ebaa.news/watch/6mdlIONO8f5MVswQ>.

Omar M., 16, born in the village of Jabal al-Zawiya, was displaced with his family to the camps of Deir Hassan in Northern Syria after his town was bombarded. In the camp, he was recruited into the ranks of HTS in late 2019 during the “Infiro Khifafan wa-Thikalan/Go forth, whether Light or Heavy. Omar was still a recruit when this report was being prepared, on March 31, 2020. A family member told STJ:

“HTS fighters used to show up in the camp, where they urged people to join jihad/strive for God’s sake. Omar was convinced that this was the only solution to escape the hell of life in the camps, and he quickly became a recruiter at one of HTS’ checkpoints, located between Idlib and Afrin. The officers gave him a house to live in instead of the tent, in addition to a salary, which prompted Omar to try to persuade the rest of his brothers to join the group, saying that a Mujahid has privileges and importance in this world and the hereafter.”

Samer M, 16, from rural Jisr al-Shughour is another child recruited by HTS in late 2019. He attended a 40-day-training camp in the city of Harem and participated in the confrontations between HTS and the Syrian regular forces. Once HTS got defeated, Samer opted for dissent and joined Ḥurrās ad-Dīn /Guardians of Religion Organizations, based in the Turkmen Mountains. Samer was yet a recruit when this report was being prepared, on March 31, 2020. A family member narrated the following to STJ:

“Samer dropped out of school in 2015, affected by the military operations that took place then in the region. He considered carrying weapons after his brother was killed in 2017, who was recruited into the ranks of the HTS. He sought to avenge his brother’s death, not to mention the poverty his family suffered, especially after their displacement. This gave him the motive to join the ranks of HTS, and then Guardians of Religion. The problem is that Samer today keeps repeating that his supreme goal is to make Sharia rule, and that if jihad ends in our country, he will seek it in Yemen.”

4. Dozens of Children Recruited by Syrian Government Loyalist Militias in Damascus and its Countryside:

In areas held by the Syrian regular forces and loyalist militias, child recruitment started in 2018, after the latter took full control of the city of Damascus and its countryside. Militias including the National Defense, the al-Nujaba movement⁹ and the Lebanese Hezbollah enlisted children within their ranks.

⁹ It is an Iraqi faction linked to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and is considered one of the largest factions of the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq. Led by Akram al-Ka’abi, this faction has supported the Syrian regular forces in their battles against the armed opposition in southern rural Aleppo and the city of Aleppo.

In 2019, child recruitment witnessed an upsurge in these areas, as these militias took advantage of the poor financial conditions of many families, especially the displaced ones, where local activists estimated the number of children who were recruited into their ranks with dozens, as they targeted the most vulnerable groups of children, offering them money and power.

Khalid M., 16, from Damascus countryside, is one of the children recruited by the National Defense Forces of the Syrian government in mid-2019, after his family was displaced to a town west of the capital, Damascus. Khalid is perhaps his family's breadwinner, for his father died in the detention centers of the Syrian regular forces, which makes the main reason for his joining their ranks. His mother narrated the following to STJ:

"After my husband got arrested, Khalid worked in a store. The owner of the store began asking him to monitor the people in the neighborhood, and then gave him a walky-talky to inform him of the latest developments and the condition on the neighborhood. Discovering this, I asked my son to quit the job. He did not mind it and told me that he would go to the store to return the walky-talky, but Khalid did not return home that day. I got anxious and started searching for him. I interrogated the owner of the store, but he told me that he knew nothing. A week passed, I kept searching for my son, but it was all to no avail. Then, I learned from a volunteer with the National Defense that my son had also volunteered into the same group, and that he was at one of its posts in the area of Jabal al-Ward."

She added:

"Hearing this, I hurried to the same store where my son used to work. I asked the shop owner to bring me my son back, but he threatened to arrest me if I came back and asked about him, or even if I stayed in the neighborhood. I had no choice but to catch up with my family in Idlib. I borrowed some money and sold all the furniture to secure the journey's costs. I knew nothing about my son since then, except what some neighbors convey to me. A while ago, nonetheless, I received a WhatsApp voice note from him, telling me that I am no longer his mother because I left to the terrorists' areas. When I tried to call him, he blocked me."

Luay D., 16, from Eastern Ghouta, is another child who had been recruited into the ranks of the Iranian militias loyal to the Syrian government, established in Damascus city. Enlisted in late 2019, Luay was still a recruit when this report was prepared, on March 26, 2020. Commenting on this, Luay's father narrated the following to STJ:

"After we got displaced from Eastern Ghouta, I registered my son in an institute in Damascus, where he was to get compensative sessions, given that he dropped out of school amid the war conditions. A few weeks later, I noticed that my son began to return home late. He showed signs of fatigue and went to bed immediately. Next,

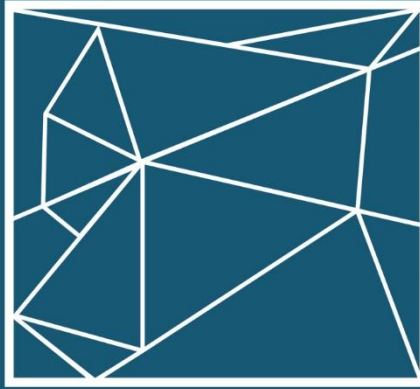
he expressed a new attachment to religion and preferred to wear black, putting a green bracelet on his wrist. At first, we did not take it seriously, and we thought it was the teenage folly, until he disappeared for 10 days. We started searching for him then."

He added:

"I went to the institute to ask about my son, but they told me that he had not come for a while. About a week later, he called and told us that he is on a jihad mission to defend the family of the Prophet on the Syrian-Lebanese border, and that he will return soon. Upon his return, we were surprised by the military uniform he wore and the rifle he had. On his right shoulder, there was a slogan: 'Zainab will not be held a captive.' Asking him about all this, he said that he was now a recruit of a Lebanese Hezbollah-affiliated militia and that he stopped going to the institute because he is performing a sacred duty and want to go to paradise. He also told us that he was receiving religious lessons in a mosque in al-Sayeda Zainab and the Iranian Cultural Center in Damascus, in addition to the training he underwent to learn using arms on the outskirts of the city of Damascus."

The witness indicated that his son was so changed after his recruitment, adding that he became irritable, and he refused to give them any information about his duties. He once threatened them when they tried to stop him and persuade him to change his mind, where he told them that he will leave their punishment to the militia he is enlisted in.

سوريون
من أجل
الحقيقة
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Syrians
For Truth
& Justice



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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