

A Complaint to the UN on the Deployment of Children to Fight Alongside Mercenaries Sent to Libya

Four Syrian Organizations Called on the Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries and the UN Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons to Halt the Recruitment of Syrian Children to Serve in Foreign Conflicts

[Syrians for Truth and Justice](#) (STJ), the [Syria Justice and Accountability Centre](#) (SJAC), [PÊL – Civil Waves](#), and [Hevdestî – Synergy](#), submitted a complaint to the Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries and the UN Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, addressing the recruitment and deployment of children to fight alongside mercenaries sent to Libya by Turkey and Russia. The submission draws on a new field of research on the recruitment of Syrian children for combat in foreign conflicts in 2020 and 2021.

Since late 2019, Syrian fighters have been recruited to join the war in Libya as mercenaries to support the Government of National Accord (GNA), which was led by Fayez al-Sarraj and backed by Turkey, or the Libyan National Army (LNA), led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar and backed by Russia and other countries. While covering the recruitment of Syrian mercenaries to Libya, STJ and SJAC [obtained evidence](#) that Turkey and Russia, and allied forces, particularly the armed groups they back, enlisted dozens of children under 18 to fight in Libya as mercenaries throughout 2020 and 2021.

“By recruiting Syrian children to fight their proxy conflicts, the governments of Turkey, Russia, and Libya continue to exploit a generation of Syrian youth who have only grown up in armed conflict and humanitarian crisis,” said Mohammad Al Abdallah, executive director of the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre. “The UN must pressure these governments to cease their practices, which grossly violate international humanitarian and human rights law, and call out states that are attempting to normalize relations with them.”

Fighters who fought in Libya testified to having seen children actively participating in hostilities and being injured. A medical source from Tripoli Hospital, who was [interviewed](#) on 28 January 2021, stated:

“At work, I saw many injured children. It was apparent that they were under-18 even though their identity documents (IDs) indicated they were above-18. Nearly two months ago, two children were brought to the hospital for treatment from pneumonia. Their IDs said they were born in 2003 and 2002. But when the doctor asked them about their true age, the first said he was 17 and the second 16 and a half. I cannot tell the exact number of children here. But I am sure they are numerous.”

STJ obtained testimonies from fighters who returned to Syria over the second half of 2020 that confirm that nearly 200 child recruits are stranded in the Libyan city of Tripoli at a military camp in the vicinity of Mitiga International Airport. Other children remain on duty, performing mercenary military tasks. Furthermore, one of the testimonies obtained by STJ—the first of its kind—reveals that the pro-GNA Libyan Liwa al-Sumood (Brigade of Steadfastness), led by Salah Badi, has been recruiting Syrian fighters, including children, apart from Turkey and SNA armed groups.

According to sources from the opposition-affiliated Syrian National Army (SNA), Turkish authorities have lately sought to tighten restrictions on child recruitment. In May 2019, the Ministry of Defense of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) stated that the SNA had stopped enlisting or accepting child volunteers as mercenaries, implying that child recruitment had

previously occurred. However, testimonies and accounts prove that Syrian children continued to be recruited up to at least July 2021, [ignoring](#) the decision passed by the Ministry of Defense of the SIG and the instructions of the Turkish command. As of July 2021, STJ and SJAC have confirmed that within the military groups of the SNA, the Auxiliary Forces/ al-Quwat al-Radifa, Front and Alert Units, and Special Intrusion Units are confirmed to have children serving among their ranks in Libya.

Similarly, investigations by the listed organizations revealed that hundreds of Syrians were transferred to Libya by armed Syrian groups and Russian security companies between 23 October 2020 and early April 2021. The enlistments were carried out by para-military groups directly linked with the Syrian government and included several confirmed children who were provided with identity documents falsifying their age. Sources noted that Russian forces were aware the children were being recruited but chose to turn a blind eye.

The continued recruitment and use of Syrian children in hostilities is a clear violation of international humanitarian and international human rights law. *Turkey is a signatory of both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, thus bearing the obligation to prevent armed groups it supports from recruiting children.*

Children enrolled in armed forces see several their rights violated, including in some cases, their right to life. Deprived of care and education, children taking part in hostilities will struggle to return to civilian lives. In addition to directly impacting them, this further impedes chances for Syrian society to recover after the conflict.

Consequently, STJ, SJAC, PÊL, Hevdestî demand the UN Working Group and UN Special Rapporteur pressure Turkey and Russia, as well as the armed groups responsible for the recruitment of children, to halt the recruitment of children. Additionally, we urge the UN Working Group and UN Special Rapporteur to enjoin the UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) to address the grave violations of recruiting or using child soldiers and organize a country visit to assess the global situation of children in Syria and the extent of their being trafficked in order to participate in hostilities.



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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