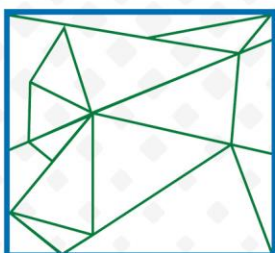


# Northeastern Syria: The RY Use of Child Soldiers Continues Unabated

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سوريون  
من أجل  
الحقيقة  
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Syrians  
For Truth  
& Justice



July, 2023

## **Northeastern Syria: The RY Use of Child Soldiers Continues Unabated**

*The AANES and the SDF must reactivate and fully implement the action plan signed with UN and ensure transparent accountability of child recruitment perpetrators*

The Revolutionary Youth (RY),<sup>1</sup> locally known as Taveras Ciwanên Şoresşger, continues to recruit minors in Syria's northeastern areas, sometimes through kidnapping.

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), in control of the areas where the RY is active, has not complied with its public commitments to restrict the RY activities and close its offices and headquarters. This was proved by the UN Secretary-General's report on Children and Armed Conflict of late June 2023,<sup>2</sup> which cited the involvement of the RY in 21 child recruitment cases.

The AANES along with its Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) promised to stop the child use and recruitment and to return all of the enlisted children back to their families. Moreover, the AANES pledged to redress the RY violations and hold perpetrators accountable. However, these promises were unfortunately not serious and have not yet been fulfilled. On the contrary, the AANES offices refused to register any of the complaints filed by families of recruited children, especially those against the RY.

**Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) has been able to document at least 32 child recruitment cases in the first half of 2023. It is verified that the RY was responsible for most of these cases, while the Women's Protection Units was to blame for one.**

Thirteen of the documented cases were of under-18 girls and the rest of male children, carried out as such; 10 cases in Qamishli/Qamishlo, five cases in Ayn al-Arab/Kobani, four cases in Manbij, five cases in Raqqa, three cases in al-Hasakah, five cases in al-Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood, Aleppo.

Pursuing its task of monitoring human rights violations, especially those committed against children, STJ documented child use and recruitment cases by all parties to the Syrian conflict. In 2022, the organization verified; the recruitment of [49 children](#) in the AANES areas, the use of [children as mercenaries](#) in the Libyan conflict by Turkish-backed Syrian armed rebel groups, and the involvement of Harakat al-Tahrir wa-l-Binaa/Liberation and Construction Movement (LCM) in [such cases](#).

It should be recalled that the recruitment or involvement of children in armed conflicts by non-state armed groups violates international law and may amount to a war crime if the recruited child was under 15 of age, according to the 1988 Rome Statute, the International Criminal Court's (ICC) founding treaty. The child's willingness or consent to join an armed group does not relieve the latter of its obligations under international law. Notably, authorities in the autonomous areas ratified agreements that clearly prohibited the use and recruitment of children under the age of 18.

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<sup>1</sup> The RY was established in 2011 and is licensed by the Autonomous Administration. Despite the founders' efforts to promote the group as an independent entity, it has been administratively affiliated with the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

<sup>2</sup> "Children and Armed Conflict", a report by the UN Secretary-General, issued as A/77/895-S/2023/363 in June 2023, pp. 30, 31 and 32.

The AANES stated in Article 29 of its Constitution – officially titled the [Charter of Social Contract](#) – of 2014, “This contract ensures the right of children, prevent child labor, exploiting and torturing them psychologically and physically, and marrying them at a young age.” As such, it is all the more important for the Contract to prohibit child recruitment for use in hostilities, especially as it [set the minimum age](#) of recruitment for military service (self-defense duty) at 18 years.

Furthermore, Article 88 of the aforementioned Contract stresses the need to apply the current Syrian Ordinances (criminal and civil) in a manner consistent with the provisions and articles of this contract. Article 46 of the Syrian Civil Code promulgated in Legislative Decree No. 84 of 1949 stipulates that the age of majority is attained on reaching the age of 18 full Gregorian years. Similarly, Article 4 of the Military Service Law No. 30 of 2007 and its amendments states that a man shall start his compulsory military service on January 1st of the year in which he turned 18.

In light of the above, STJ urges all military actors involved in the use and recruitment of children in hostilities to stop these egregious violations and comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL). In the same vein, we would like to recommend the AANES and the SDF, in particular to,

1. Demonstrate transparency and full commitment to the agreements on the prevention of child recruitment and use in armed conflicts, including those signed with the Geneva Call in July 2014, and with the UN in late June 2019. That must be accompanied by the reactivation of the action plan signed with the UN and the work towards its full implementation, as well as the reactivation of child protection offices.
2. Demobilize child soldiers immediately, reunite them with their families, and put those at risk of home violence in the care of the responsible civilian authorities.
3. Monitor the functioning of the child protection offices, in receiving complaints related to child recruitment and handling them, and take punitive measures against those found indulged in child recruitment, including the RY and the Women's Protection Units.
4. To dissolve the groups and organizations recruiting children and to hold all parties – individuals and entities – involved in such acts accountable.
5. The AANES must respect its own Charter of Social Contract as well as its decisions that set the age of military service (self-defense duty) at 18 years.

### **Recent Testimonies on Recruiting Minors in AANES Areas**

As part of the verification operation, STJ reached out to several families of children recruited in the Autonomous Administration areas and collected detailed testimonies.



- **She went to her school in al-Malikiyah/Derik and never return**

In February 2023, the family of child Yousra, who hails from al-Malikiyah/Derik, went through a tough time when Yousra disappeared, until it turned out that she was recruited.

STJ met a relative of Yousra online for further details about the incident, the witness said,

“It was early February 2023, the first day of the second semester. On that day, Yousra, who was in the seventh grade, left home for school in al-Malikiyah/Derik earlier than usual to not miss the bus that transports the students to and from the city, as she told her elder sister. However, the bus returned to the village without Yousra. At about 3 pm that day, Yousra’s family started searching for her, starting from her school, where teachers told them that she did not come. Then, they searched in the playgrounds, where she would go to play with her friends, and everywhere she might have gone, including the houses of her relatives and friends, but to no avail.”

The family later was shocked to learn that Yousra joined the RY

The witness added,

“People close to the RY confirmed to the family that the armed group enlisted Yousra and transferred her to Qamishli/Qamishlo. Those sources, who declined to be named, alleged that the RY claimed that Yousra fled her family’s house following a dispute with her parents and would return after three days when things calm down.”

The witness assured STJ that Yousra did not have any dispute with her family. He concluded that people close to the AANES then promised to return Yousra after a three-month military training, but several months passed since then and the girl has not returned.

- **She disappeared while back from English Institute in Ayn al-Arab/Kobanî**

Feda’ A. was among the girls recruited by the RY in Ayn al-Arab/Kobanî in April 2023. A relative of Feda’ – she lives abroad – confirmed to STJ that Feda’ disappeared while on her way back from an English course she was attending at one of the city’s institutes. She was improving her English because she wanted to travel to her fiancé in the United Kingdom.

The source gave an exclusive testimony to STJ in June 2023 saying,

“On 6 April 2023, Feda’ went to the English course she was attending at an institute in Ayn al-Arab/Kobanî. She was improving her English as she was

waiting for the decision about the reunion with her fiancé who lives in the United Kingdom. She ran into her father on a street near their house (48th Street), while on her way back from the institute and told him she was heading home.”

Feda’ did not arrive home that day and her family could not reach her via phone as it was turned off. The family asked relatives and friends about Feda’, but they had no information about her.

As such, the family filed a complaint to the internal security forces, known as the Asayish, in Ayn al-Arab/Kobani and told them that Feda’ was last seen by her father near the mosque on the city’s main street, called the 48th Street. It is known that this street has surveillance cameras. However, the family was shocked to hear from the Asayish that Feda’ did not appear in any of the videos of that day. This is contrary to the allegations of Feda’ father of seeing her on this street before she disappeared.

The source added,

“In mid-April unidentified militiamen came to the family of Feda’ – the family could not know whether they belong to the RY or the Women’s Protection Units – and gave them personal stuff of Feda’ claiming that the latter joined their group voluntarily. However, the family refuted these claims, citing Feda’ learning English to join her fiancé residing in Europe.”

The source confirmed that the family filed a complaint with the Child Protection Office, but they did not get any positive results.

#### - **Her Mother recognized Her in a TV Report**

Nermin Sh. who was born in 2009 to a stateless/maktumah family,<sup>3</sup> was one of the girls enlisted by the RY in Qamishli/Qamishlo, in which control is shared by the AANES and the Syrian government.

For further details about this recruitment incident, STJ spoke to a relative of Nermin via a phone interview, he explained,

“Nermin has three younger brothers; she was spoiled. There had no disputes neither with her brothers nor with her parents. Before her disappearance, Nermin would have secret talks with two girls of our relatives her age who used to visit her frequently. In addition, I noted that she would talk to strangers on WhatsApp and delete the conversations.”

Shortly after, Nermin disappeared with the two girls who used to visit her. However, the girls returned home but Nermin has not.

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<sup>3</sup> The family was deprived of the Syrian nationality as a result of the 1962 Census.

The source added,

**“Nermin did not return with the two girls who disappeared with her. Nermin’s family asked the two girls about her whereabouts; the latter confessed that they got in a van driven by a young man who took them to the Suez Canal neighborhood, east of Qamishli/Qamishlo. The family later heard that Nermin was seen in a compound of the RY.”**

About two months after Nermin’s disappearance, two members of the RY came to her family and told them that she was undergoing six-month military training and would be enlisted in the RY or the Women's Protection Units. Thereafter, Nermin’s mother recognized her in the ranks of a group of the RY shown in a TV report.

The source concluded,

**“As a family, we want our daughter to visit us and then go anywhere she wants. Hiding her this way is intolerable and unacceptable.”**

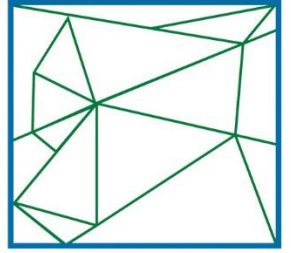
On a similar incident, STJ heard an exclusive testimony via phone from the family of the girl Ghazalah M. The witnesses confirmed that two unidentified girls dragged Ghazalah to Rmelan town to attend sports events at preparatory schools, Ghazalah was in the seventh grade.

After the disappearance of Ghazalah, who was the only child to her mother, her uncles began searching for her in the RY centers and in the AANES institutions, but without results.

The family reported that they received threats from fake social media accounts over frequent appearances on Kurdish media to demand revealing the fate of their only daughter.

The family learned later that their daughter was seen in a military camp of the RY near Mount Abdulaziz/Jabal Abd al Aziz in al-Hasakah, which hold many recruited children. Sources also told the family that Ghazalah was put under special guard to prevent her escape.

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## About Us:

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization monitoring human rights violations in Syria. Founded in 2015, STJ has been based in France since 2019.

STJ is an impartial and independent Syrian human rights organization operating across Syria. Our network of field researchers monitor and report human rights violations occurring on the ground in Syria, while our international team of human rights experts, lawyers, and journalists gather evidence, examine emerging patterns of violations, and analyze how violations break domestic Syrian and international law.

We are committed to documenting violations of human rights committed by all parties in the Syrian conflict and elevating the voices of all Syrians victimized by human rights violations, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, class, and/or gender. Our commitment to human rights monitoring is founded on the idea that professional human rights documentation meeting international standards is the first step to uncovering the truth and achieving justice in Syria.



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